

Storybrooke Asylum

by: Chrmdpoet

Chapter 1: Welcome to Storybrooke

A/N: Hello everyone! I am so excited to be writing this story. It was inspired by an excellent Tumblr prompt by mishka47, and I hope to do the fantastic idea some justice. Keep in mind that this story is very AU, and it will be SwanQueen.

I wrote this first chapter to the soundtrack of "Darkest Child" by Kevin MacLeod, and you will DEFINITELY want to use it while you read. It gives a thrilling effect. I hope you all enjoy this chapter and the rest of the story as it develops. XO-Chrmypoet

Chapter One: Welcome to Storybrooke

The air was frigid as was typical of Maine in the winter months, and the sky was darker than usual, billowing gray threatening a treacherous storm. The doctor tucked his chin to his chest to protect his face from the wind as he stepped from the warm confines of his vehicle. He held tightly to his coat, pulling it close to his body with one gloved hand, and gripped a black leather briefcase with his other as he walked briskly toward the towering stone steps that led to the massive black doors of one of Maine's oldest and most notorious buildings.

The doors creaked loudly as he pulled them open and stepped inside the building. The musty odor of age tickled unpleasantly at his nose as he eyed an approaching orderly, dressed entirely in white scrub-like attire. The young orderly tilted his head to the side and narrowed his eyes as he approached and asked, "You the new doc for Ward Four?"

The doctor nodded with a curt smile and drawled, "Yes, I suppose that would be me."

The orderly didn't return his smile, his young face hardened and jaded from working in a place fraught with agony, delirium, and fear, a place where the screams of deluded souls echoed around the halls and haunted the sleepless nights. In some wards, there was peace. There was blessed silence. In others,

though, where the minds were twisted like gnarled branches and bark, the silence was eerie or nonexistent, and crept into the flesh to turn it old and hard long before it was due to age. That was the ill effect of caring for the deranged. It never got any easier. It never lightened the heart.

"Alright then, follow me," the orderly said before turning on his heel and heading through a large archway that led into a seemingly endless corridor. Their shoes tapped loudly against the stone floor as they walked, the rhythm of their steps echoing around the corridor like thunder and causing that uneasy ominous feeling to seep into the doctor's chest. He had been subject to many dangers in his life. It was the nature of the specialty he had chosen as a profession, and thus, fear and unease had long ago abandoned him. This place, however, set him on edge. Perhaps it was the age of the building or the hints of decay that lined the walls. Perhaps it was the stench in the air that smelled so like hopelessness, so like death. Perhaps it was merely the knowledge that he was to spend a month living in this place to tend to a select number of patients considered by numerous professionals to be beyond help, beyond rehabilitation; to live literally among what society deemed as devils.

They rounded a corner in silence and entered another long, deserted corridor that had no doors and no windows. There was nothing hanging on the walls, and all signs of life were absent but for the steady tapping of their feet. When they came to the end of the corridor, there was but a single black door, which the orderly knocked lightly upon before swiftly entering at the faint sound of someone's consent.

The orderly swung the door open and all but pushed the doctor inside before exiting once more, clicking the door quietly closed behind him. The room was a massive office, lit only by a single desk lamp. He could see that the entire back wall of the office was lined with tall filing cabinets, patient files no doubt, but outside of that, there was but a desk and three chairs.

"Good evening," a voice sounded, snapping the doctor to attention. He turned to see an elder man in a pressed black suit standing just within the shadows off to the right of the desk and leaning upon a cane.

"Evening," the doctor managed with a simple smile.

The man's cane tapped and scratched against the stone floor as he limped forward, his dark eyes locked curiously upon the doctor, and held out his hand. "You must be Dr. Hopper. You may call me Mr. Gold. I am the director of the facility."

"Yes," Dr. Hopper said with a nod. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gold."

Mr. Gold hummed in agreement before moving back to his desk to retrieve an open file sitting atop it. "How are you enjoying Maine, Doctor?" he asked uninterestedly as he flipped to find a specific page in the file.

"It's rather cold," the doctor said with a slight chuckle.

"Indeed," Mr. Gold replied dryly. "It takes some getting used to. I trust you had no trouble finding the place?"

"I did get turned around a few times," Dr. Hopper admitted with a chuckle. "It is a heavily wooded area and set fairly far from the town."

"Ah, here it is." Mr. Gold said, ignoring the doctor's words as he tapped the page in front of him. "Your file says that you are a Forensic Psychiatrist, and that you have specialties in criminology, schizophrenia, and dissociation, yes?"

"That is correct," Dr. Hopper answered with a nod. "I spend most of my time working with the legal system as you can imagine, but I am often recruited to psychiatric institutions around the country, such as this one, to observe and possibly treat particularly difficult, alarming, or unique cases."

"Mm," the director hummed as he scanned the doctor with his eyes as if assessing his value. "Well, let us see how well you do with some of our own particularly...what was it you said? Ah, yes, *unique* cases. Shall we?"

"Lead the way," the doctor said with a respectful nod and a smile that the director failed to reciprocate.

"The facility has four major wards divided by levels," Mr. Gold informed Dr. Hopper as they made their way onto a rickety old elevator, composed

entirely of wood, which served to make the doctor highly uneasy. "The first floor, where you and I met, is the Administrative floor, and that is where your living quarters for the next month will be. The second floor is Ward One, commonly referred to by the orderlies as the 'In and Out', as that is where we house patients with temporary or highly treatable psychoses--depression, suicide risks, and the like. Those patients are typically with us anywhere from 72 hours to six weeks. On the third floor, you'll find Ward Two, the disorders ward. Primarily patients in Ward Two suffer from debilitating disorders that fail to respond to treatment--advanced obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar, and such. The first two wards are, for the most part, nonviolent, and those patients that are violent are typically only a danger to themselves. The fourth floor is home to Ward Three and that is where things begin to get fun, Doctor."

"Fun?" Dr. Hopper asked, arching an eyebrow as he tilted his head toward the director.

"The orderlies like to refer to Ward Three as 'Wonderland'," Mr. Gold told him with a flourishing flick of his wrist, "because the patients there will tell you stories and put on shows the likes of which you will never find in books or movies, cases I believe you would probably be quite familiar with. These patients suffer from schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, compulsive delusions, advanced borderline personality disorder, and the like."

"Ah," the doctor said knowingly as the elevator creaked up past Ward Three, the tiny glass window on its doors allowing them to see into the ward as they passed.

"And finally we come to your new home-sweet-home, Doctor; the fifth floor, Ward Four," the director said as the elevator slammed to a jarring halt. Mr. Gold slid open the door of the elevator just as a bone-chilling howl ripped through the air, causing the hairs on the back of Dr. Hopper's neck to stand at attention. He was barely able to keep himself from jolting in surprise, though he managed to keep his composure as he turned wide eyes to the director and raised a questioning eyebrow as they stepped into the first of many dark corridors.

"Ah, that would be Miss Lucas," Mr. Gold hummed knowingly. "She should certainly serve as one of your more *unique* and interesting cases while you're here."

"And she suffers from?" the doctor asked, his skin still prickling uneasily in the aftermath of the chilling sound.

"Clinical lycanthropy," the director answered as they made their way slowly down the first corridor, the walls lined with cells barred by heavy iron doors with tiny Plexiglas windows. "She believes she is a werewolf."

"Really?" Dr. Hopper asked, excitement evident in his voice. "I've only ever seen one other case before. It's quite rare, though hardly known to incite violence in the patient. This *is* the criminal ward, is it not? I hardly think it's a place for one suffering from clinical lycanthropy."

"Ah, but it is for Miss Lucas," Mr. Gold argued. "You see, during one of her 'transformations' as she calls them, Miss Lucas mauled her boyfriend, a young man by the name of Peter, to death. She killed him with nothing more than her bare hands and her teeth and then, Doctor, she proceeded to eat him. She had devoured nearly half of his body by the time someone happened upon the scene and called the police."

Dr. Hopper visibly shivered upon hearing the story, before silently nodding his head for the director to continue. "You see," Mr. Gold said as they made their way into the next corridor, aching moans and rapid whispers and frantic voices crying out around them from every direction, "Ward Four is much like Ward Three, the patients suffering from many of the same psychoses. These patients, however, are deadly. Do not assume they are harmless or that they will not attack you, because I assure you, the second the opportunity arises, they *will*. Many of the patients on this floor are notorious and have committed some of the most vicious crimes in recorded history. Some are simply beyond hope. Regardless of whom you treat, Doctor, be on guard at all times. Don't be tricked by pretty faces and sweet voices, for the devil hides in innocent eyes and lives in these very walls."

The doctor kept his silence despite taking slight offense to the man's words. It was a common belief by many in society that those who suffered from mental

illness or committed violent crimes as a result of mental illness were purely monsters and deserved no rights, no justice, and no respect. Dr. Hopper believed differently. He had seen many made victim to the defects of their own minds, unable to control their own bodies, and it was a terrible fate for anyone. However, so many of those people, with treatment, could live perfectly normal lives. Therefore, he was not a man who favored the foul line of thinking that mental illness was something to be damned.

However, he was also no fool. While many people who suffered from mental illness were truly innocent and purely victims in themselves, victims to their own disorders, *others* that he had seen were truly evil. They weren't victims acting on compulsions. They made choices, knowingly, and they felt no remorse for the terrors they induced. The tricky part was weeding them out, knowing which was which--separating the truth from the façade. Dr. Hopper believed it to be in the eyes. You could see it in their eyes if you knew what to look for--the coldness. They could be superb actors, true killers, imitating emotion and sympathy and remorse, but one could not afford to be fooled, because the truth was that they felt nothing beyond the thrill of their vicious cruelty. And those people, the truly deranged, were the most terrifying of all, because they could walk freely. They fit well into society. They knew how to play the game. They could be your neighbor, your best friend, your spouse, while you remained ever clueless to their true nature. It was a frightening fact of reality that few ever liked to think on, yet to Dr. Hopper, such reality was his career and thus, his life.

"Now," Mr. Gold said as he brought them to a stop in front of one of the cells in the second corridor, "before I leave you to get settled in, there are four patients in particular that I must make mention of. This is the first."

Dr. Hopper peered through the small window and into the shadowed cell where he could just make out the huddled form of a young woman sitting on a cot in the corner. She turned her head as if sensing someone's presence, and as she did so, the small bit of light from the window filtered across her face. The doctor nearly gasped upon seeing how young and beautiful the woman was despite her tangled brown locks and disheveled patient gown. She had wide blue eyes and was clutching what appeared to be a small journal in her hands.

"Her name is Belle," Mr. Gold said, and there was a strange fondness in his voice as he said the name, "Belle French. She is non-violent, but has been admitted to Ward Four as she is a permanent resident believed to be beyond hope of treatment. Many psychiatrists have tried and none have succeeded in helping her. She is highly delusional and rarely interacts with the other patients, choosing instead to remain in her cell most of the time, except during mandatory recreation, of course. I am bringing her to your attention because she can be rather difficult to communicate with. You see, she doesn't speak."

"At all?" Dr. Hopper asked.

"At all," the director reiterated firmly. "Well, at least, not to other people. She speaks only to inanimate objects, particularly a chipped tea cup that she found one evening when she wandered unseen from the rec hall and landed in the kitchens. We allow her to keep it with her only when she is not in general population recreation, as any one of our violent patients could take the cup and use it as a weapon against others."

"Hmm, well, thank you for the warning," the doctor said with a nod as he turned away from watching the beautiful young woman and began to follow the director along the corridor once more. "I will certainly make a note of it in my files."

Gold led the doctor down a particularly quiet corridor, which was strange given that the majority of the ward up to this point had been unbearably loud with the echoes of patient murmurs, screams, and groans. Such silence in the wake of noise was so haunting that it made the doctor's skin absolutely crawl. He kept his composure, though, and waited to hear of the final three patients that the director wished to speak with him about.

"The other three patients I mentioned," Mr. Gold said as he halted once more outside of another cell, "are all housed fairly close to one another and as you will learn, are interconnected."

"From before the time of their admittance?" the doctor asked, intrigued.

"Oh, no, no," the director said, shaking his head in answer. "The development began once the most recent patient of the three was committed only about two years ago. It would seem that she is the connecting factor between the other two patients."

"I see," Dr. Hopper said, nodding, "and this is her cell?"

"It is," Gold told him as the doctor peered through the window to see a thin, fairly muscular young woman. She had long blonde hair and the sleeves of her patient uniform were rolled up to her shoulders as she did set after set of push-ups on the stone floor, paying no mind to the man peering through her window. "Her name is Emma Swan. She was an involuntary admittance after being picked up by the police for stealing over twenty thousand dollars' worth of designer watches. She was sentenced to eleven months in a minimum-security prison. Three months into her sentence, however, she began referring to herself as 'the Savior'. Only three weeks later, she gutted one of the corrections officers with a homemade knife carved from a tooth brush. She cut the woman open from stem to sternum, claiming that the officer had attacked her in 'dragon form' and that she needed a potion believed to be hidden in the 'belly of the beast'."

Dr. Hopper's brows rose at that. He realized that the director certainly hadn't been kidding when he claimed that these cases were *unique*. The doctor hadn't heard a story that fanciful in quite some time. The majority of the more violent psychotics he came in contact with claimed more along the lines of hearing voices or being possessed by demons. He was fairly excited to begin working on new cases, the likes of which he had rarely, if ever, seen.

"To be honest," Mr. Gold continued, "we know little of Miss Swan. She was an orphan and spent most of her childhood in the system; however, we have been unable to locate her records. We believe she stole her own records in her youth and disposed of them. Shortly after her arrival here, she began to refer to another of our patients, Mary Margaret Blanchard, as 'Mother', which certainly wasn't a first for us considering the complex obsessions that many of our patients develop as well as her own past; however, it seems more significant considering the grounds on which Miss Blanchard was admitted. I will get into that shortly. It seems that Miss Swan, here, has also developed an unhealthy obsession with another of our patients, the third in the little

interconnected triangle I warned you of, Patient Mills. And that, Doctor, is a dangerous development."

"Oh?" Dr. Hopper asked, intrigued. "And why is that?"

A tight smile strained across the director's thin lips as he said, "You shall soon find out."

Mr. Gold led them only two doors down to a cell where a raven-haired woman with a pixie cut lay sleeping, her arms wrapped tightly around a stuffed doll with long blonde hair. "Mary Margaret Blanchard," the director informed the doctor. "She has been a patient here for eight years, since the age of 22. Miss Blanchard was responsible for the death of both her husband and her infant daughter when she fell asleep with a lit cigarette, which subsequently set fire to the house. She was rescued by firemen, but they were unable to get to the husband and child, and the house burned to the ground. Over a third of her body is badly scarred, though she hides most of it well with her clothing."

"And her psychosis?" the doctor inquired.

"Mm," the director hummed. "Went mad with her guilt. She created an entirely imagined world in which she claims her family is alive but merely separated and that they *will* find her. She also claims to have been awoken from a sleeping curse by a magical kiss just prior to her family being separated."

"Ah, fairytale delusions," Dr. Hopper said knowingly. "I've seen it before. The mentally ill tend to bury themselves in worlds of grandeur and romanticism, and fairytale stories serve as a perfect baseline for such delusions. The stories of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are not uncommon choices."

"Yes, well, I doubt Snow White would ever have committed such atrocities as Miss Blanchard," the director said. "Shortly after the death of her family, Miss Blanchard escaped from the medical hospital where her burns were being treated, broke into the home of a young woman and her daughter, and

forced the daughter to stab the mother repeatedly in the heart. She claimed it was the only way to make the mother love the daughter."

The doctor was surprised by this as the woman looked so innocent and fragile, but then he had seen many convincing facades in his time as a forensic psychiatrist. It was often the most innocent faces that could house the most wicked souls. He chose in that moment to believe, however, that Patient Blanchard had merely been victim to her own deluded mind, and hoped that his sessions with her would prove as much.

"And finally," Gold said as he crossed the hall to the cell directly opposite Patient Blanchard's, "we come to Regina Mills. I'm sure you are aware of her case given your profession."

"Absolutely," Dr. Hopper exclaimed, nodding. "Her crimes are notorious. The media went into a frenzy over her case and trial. Her case was one of the reasons I went into Forensic Psychiatry. Absolutely fascinating."

"Indeed," the director agreed, "and she has been here ever since the trial, eighteen long years, and as you know, sentenced to life in this facility for the vicious murder of both her parents when she was only sixteen years old. Many believe she was only spared the fate of the death penalty or life in a federal prison because of the uniquely large wave of support for her from advocates all over the world who claimed she never would have committed such crimes had her parents not been so terribly abusive. Regardless, as you know, she sliced her mother to bits with a large, jagged shard of a mirror, and she cut her father's heart right out of his chest with only a pocketknife. Since her admittance, she has taken to referring to herself as 'The Evil Queen' though she has never quite made it clear what she believes she rules over."

"Fascinating," Dr. Hopper exclaimed again, to which Gold subtly rolled his eyes as the doctor stepped up to the door to peer through the small window. He nearly jumped when he saw the brunette woman standing regally against the back wall of her cell and staring directly at him. Shivers shot down his spine as a slow smirk spread across the woman's lips before he quickly turned away from the window and motioned for the director to lead on.

Mr. Gold led the doctor back to the elevator, where they rode down to the Administrative floor once more, and the director showed Dr. Hopper to his living quarters where he would be staying for the next month. As the doctor was getting settled in, Mr. Gold provided him with a map of the facility and a stack of patient files for the subjects of Ward Four. He also informed the doctor that he expected weekly progress reports on the patients and hoped to see at least one of them rehabilitated or at least treated well enough to be transferred to a non-violent ward.

"I will certainly do my best," Dr. Hopper told him with a tight smile.

"I'm sure you will," Mr. Gold replied as he limped over to the open doorway to take his leave, his cane scraping and tapping as he went. He paused just inside the archway and turned back to the doctor with a slow smile and said, "Welcome to Storybrooke Asylum, Doctor. I do hope you enjoy your stay." And with that, he closed the door, the click of the lock echoing ominously through the blackened corridors.

Chapter 2: The Queen and the Swan

A/N: Thank you everyone for the overwhelmingly positive response to the first chapter of this story. Over 50 reviews. That's incredible, so thank you all very much, and I hope I can keep you all entertained throughout the story!

Try this chapter out with a soundtrack of "A Stray Child" by Akira Yamaoka, from *Silent Hill 3*. Enjoy! XO-Chrmypoet

Chapter Two: The Queen and the Swan

Dr. Hopper stepped off the elevator and into Ward Four just as the jingling of keys echoed through the corridors. The sun would be rising within the hour and the good doctor wanted to get an early start to his day, which he chose to begin with observation. He made his way briskly through the corridors, clutching his briefcase in one hand and staring at the map that the asylum's director, Mr. Gold, had given him the previous day. The jingling of keys captured his attention again as he made his way through the ward, the sounds of cell doors being unlocked, which for some reason, made Hopper a bit uneasy.

He quickened his pace so that he could make it to the Ward-Four Recreation Hall before the patients began to filter in. He was hoping to learn a great deal about his new patients from simple observation of the ways they acted, reacted, and interacted during recreation hour, so that he would be better established, at least with some of them, when the time came for individual sessions. One could never be *too* prepared when it came to the mentally ill, especially when it came to the *violent* and mentally ill.

A small, quiet gasp escaped the doctor as he pushed open the large double doors of Ward Four's rec hall. The room was absolutely massive and beyond anything that Hopper had been expecting. One large portion of the room was packed with tables and chairs, much like that of a school cafeteria, and he could see several orderlies buzzing about and preparing large trays lined with juice and breakfast foods. As he walked, he noticed that another large

section of the rec hall was divided and somewhat closed off as if to provide a bit of privacy or quiet, which made sense given that it was full of books--a small library. There were two orderlies on guard in that section alone, most likely to avoid patients sneaking in there unnoticed and harming one another or engaging in appropriate activities. Another section had couches and a television, a large radio, and several board games stacked atop a table, though all of it looked as if it had been brought through a time portal from the 1950s, riddled with dust and age, and the couches were terribly moth-eaten.

Dr. Hopper frowned at the poor and aged conditions of much of the equipment, though of course, he was hardly surprised. Little funding was ever provided for facilities such as this, and thus the patients were made to suffer for it. It was truly heartbreaking. He hoped, at least, that the patients were being cared for properly even if their recreational services were lower grade. As long as they were allowed good hygiene, decent meals, and proper healthcare, he could overlook the aged board games and deteriorating couches.

His brows furrowed as he came to the last section of the hall, which was, for the most part, wide open and empty but for a large wooden chair sitting atop several wooden crates, elevated like a throne. It even had makeshift stairs leading up to it, composed entirely of stacks of books.

"Curious," he whispered to himself, but just as he was about to stop a passing orderly to ask about the strange display, he was distractedly snapped to attention by the sound of the rec hall's double doors being thrown open as patients began to trickle in. Dr. Hopper quickly grabbed a small chair from the area with the television and pulled it back into a shadowed corner where he could observe the patients in peace and hopefully without drawing much attention. As he settled himself into the chair, he pulled a small tape recorder from his briefcase along with a yellow memo pad and his favorite ballpoint pen, and finally he was ready to begin.

As patients filtered into the rec hall, they would immediately turn toward the area where the orderlies were passing out breakfast foods and juice, each of them receiving a single cup of juice and a paper plate containing eggs, toast, and what looked like, from a distance, orange and apple slices. Dr. Hopper jotted a note on his memo pad that the patients were served a satisfactory

breakfast and was pleased to learn as much. He hoped the same would prove true for the patients' lunches and dinners.

When he glanced up again, a flash of blonde caught his attention and he immediately pressed the red-circle button on his tape recorder, knowing he would have plenty to record about the patient who'd just walked in. He instantly recognized her from the previous evening when Mr. Gold had brought four particular patients to his attention prior to settling down for the night. The woman's long, ratty blonde hair was familiar, but it was the rolled up sleeves and the flexing biceps that made the connection as Hopper flashed back to the previous night when he'd seen the woman doing rigorous sets of push-ups on the stone floor of her cell.

Emma Swan.

"Patient Swan seems to make a point of exposing her biceps," the doctor spoke quietly into his tape recorder as he jotted notes on his memo pad. "This is often a display of power, authority, and/or strength. It is often also seen amongst prison inmates, and thus could be a result of the short amount of time Patient Swan spent in the prison system, or it may perhaps even have roots in the patient's years in the foster system--a sign of...mm...independence."

He watched as the blonde headed for the breakfast area, but was surprised when he quickly dropped out of sign. Dr. Hopper rose to his feet so he could crane his neck higher in an effort to see her, and that's when he realized that she was crouched low to the ground and weaving in and out of the huddled crowd of patients surrounding the breakfast trays. The doctor watched, impressed, as no one seemed to even notice the woman darting around their legs and over their feet until she reached the two-tiered breakfast carts and sneakily grabbed two different plates and two different glasses of juice, stacking the plates so that she could hold them in one hand and gripping both cups in the other by their open rims. She then stealthily weaved her way back through the mass of legs before she rose into a standing position and calmly made her way to the back of the rec hall.

Dr. Hopper quickly jotted down a few notes about the little show, citing that the patient's desire or compulsion to take extra food could also have roots in

her time spent in prison or perhaps due to a larger appetite from the physical labor of exercise she engaged in in her cell. Those theories were soon dashed though as he watched the blonde woman make her way over to a chair directly opposite the large makeshift throne. She sat the two cups of juice, one apple and one orange, down on the floor and then swiftly rearranged the food on the plates so that instead of mixed slices of apples and oranges on both plates, one plate had all orange slices and the other had all apple slices.

The doctor found this development rather strange indeed, especially when he noticed the way that the blonde's calculating emerald eyes darted several times to the large barred clock on the wall and then to the double doors and then back to the plates in her lap. He then watched as she rose quickly from her chair, swiping up the cup of apple juice from the floor, and swiftly crossed over to the makeshift throne. She sat the cup of apple juice on one of the wooden arms of the chair, and then placed the paper plate with eggs, toast, and only apple slices on the other arm, before she darted quickly back over to her own chair, pushing it back into the shadows so that she was partially hidden from view. She then sat down calmly and began to eat her own breakfast consisting of eggs, toast, *only* orange slices, and orange juice.

Dr. Hopper was thoroughly intrigued by the blonde's actions but could make neither heads nor tails of it; that is until the double doors of the rec hall burst forcefully open barely thirty seconds later to reveal none other than the notorious Regina Mills. He would recognize her anywhere, seeing as how her face had been plastered all over television screens and newspapers when she was only sixteen years old. Sure, she had aged in the eighteen years she'd spent living in the asylum, but she was still easily recognizable, and just as stunningly beautiful as she had been all those years ago.

Her beauty had been a huge talking point during the media frenzy over her case and trial eighteen years prior. People had been absolutely confounded by it, as if someone so stunning should never have been capable of committing such atrocities as those committed by one Regina Mills. Some had even argued that her beauty gave her an edge of innocence that unfairly led to leniency by the jury. Others argued that her beauty would have been the death of her had she been sent to a federal prison, that she would have been

made victim to abuse yet again within the system as she had been by her parents, and it would lead only to more violence.

For a time, the media had been obsessed with the girl's appearance, and as a result, she had been dubbed with many titles by the public, all having roots in her beauty. Some referred to her as "Black Beauty" for they claimed only a heart as black as coal could ever commit the crimes she committed. Others called her "The Angel of Death" for her face seemed so innocent, so stunningly gorgeous and angelic, and yet she never once denied the terrifying acts she'd performed upon her own parents, and at times, even seemed quite pleased with what she'd done. Still others mockingly referred to her as "Miss Murder", a play on the title of Miss America, for there was no denying that Regina Mills was a beauty queen. Some called her the "Vengeful Princess" and others even dubbed her "The Devil's Child." The entire country had been absolutely obsessed with her, her crimes, and her story.

Regina Mills stood just inside the rec hall, hands planted firmly on her hips, her short, dark chocolate locks swishing around her face, and her deep brown eyes surveying the bodies milling around the room. She smirked knowingly as the entire hall went silent, except for the orderlies who merely rolled their eyes dramatically and mumbled to one another. All the other patients, however, began slinking back toward the walls and some of them even lowered down to the ground. She glared coldly and cruelly at all of them, as if she hadn't a care in the world for them, and most likely didn't, before she threw out her right arm and pointed at a trembling man tucked into a corner.

"Sidney," she suddenly drawled, her voice low and seductive, nearly a purr, but it failed to fool the doctor. He could hear the cruelty in her voice, the power. He'd heard it many times when speaking with the criminally insane, working at deeming whether or not they were competent enough to stand trial. Many stone-cold killers had mastered the art of seduction with their eyes and voice alone, tempting others into doing whatever they asked or desired, going wherever they commanded, and the like. Regina Mills was no different. Her voice was pure seduction, but her intent--solely a show of power and authority.

As soon as she said the cowering man's name, he cleared his throat, grabbed what appeared to be a toy drum sitting next to him and began to beat out an uneven and poorly played rhythm as his deep voice loudly filtered into the room. "Dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum," he hummed, his makeshift music serving as some sort of introduction to Patient Mills' entrance, because as soon as he began to play and sing the rhythm, the brunette woman held her chin high and marched swiftly through the room, her hips swaying, her lips smirking, and her eyes set firmly upon a destination in the distance, which quickly turned out to be the makeshift throne at the end of the rec hall.

Dr. Hopper was absolutely fascinated by this, though not entirely surprised given that Mr. Gold had informed him of Patient Mills' tendency to refer to herself as "The Evil Queen." The doctor had not actually expected the woman to have taken the title to such an extreme, though, or to have roped the other patients into submission somehow; all of which he made note of by scratching out theories on his memo pad and whispering observations into his tape recorder. He was curious to know if the brunette was truly deluded into believing she was both "evil" as well as a "queen," or if she was simply enjoying the power boost and playing on the nature of her crimes. She certainly had that coldness in her eyes, that coldness that had often distinguished to the doctor the difference between the truly insane and the calculated façade.

"So curious," he hummed to himself.

The makeshift royal bard, Sidney, instantly silenced his poorly sung and tapped rhythm once the apparent queen reached her rickety throne, and the hall suddenly seemed to snap back into life. Patients turned back to their breakfasts, murmured to themselves and each other, or dropped onto ragged couches to watch reruns of some old sitcom that several of them would probably never understand. Dr. Hopper, though, was focused solely on Patient Mills, a woman he had been fascinated by since he was a young man just beginning his doctorate program.

Regina was just about to begin her ascent up the staircase made of books that led to her throne when she glanced up and stopped short, noticing the apple juice and the plate of breakfast containing only apple slices. Her chocolate

locks swished beautifully as she turned her head in the direction opposite her throne and peered knowingly into the shadows.

Dr. Hopper instantly slid to the edge of his seat as his eyes darted back and forth between Patient Mills and the shadowed area where he knew Patient Swan to be seated, one of her legs just barely visible in the darkened portion of the room where it seemed several of the fluorescent lights had burned out. It seemed that the brunette was well aware of Swan's presence there as well, and the doctor only became all the more curious as he watched a slow, simple, yet stunning smile touch Regina's lips for only a moment before it disappeared and she turned to make her way up the wobbly staircase and into her rickety old throne.

His ballpoint pen rapidly scratched across the page as Dr. Hopper jotted down a new development of notes after having witnessed such a display, for the smile he'd only just seen paint Patient Mills' face was not only bashful in nature and obviously genuine; it was also rather telling. It seemed there was a break in the grand composure of "The Evil Queen", a blonde-haired, emerald-eyed break by the name of Emma Swan.

Chapter 3: We're All Mad Here

A/N: Hello everyone! I hope you are all loving the story so far, and thank you so much to everyone who has read, favorited, followed, and especially to those who have reviewed. I truly appreciate it more than I can say.

This has been my favorite chapter to write thus far, and I think you will all enjoy it as well. I wanted to give you a heads-up that while this story will have bits of humor sprinkled throughout, it will also begin to take a more twisted turn toward horror as we proceed. I hope you all are as excited as I am!

**I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of the theme song from the movie *Dead Silence*. Give it a try. I think you'll find the effect thrilling. Enjoy!
XO-Chrmddpoet**

Chapter Three: We're All Mad Here

Strange chills shot down the doctor's spine as the loud tinkling of a wind-up doll echoed in the air of the rec hall, effectively breaking his attention away from Patients Mills and Swan. He glanced to the source of the noise and noticed another familiar face, the face of a pixie-haired young woman. She carried a wind-up jewelry box in her hands that had a dancing doll or perhaps it was a ballerina standing within it as she walked silently through the shadows and toward the place where Patient Swan was sitting shrouded in darkness.

Mary Margaret Blanchard didn't say a word, and her eyes seemed to be glazed over as she gripped the old jewelry box so tightly that the doctor was surprised the already splintered wood didn't just crumble in her hands. He took note of the woman's obvious dependence upon childish things, things that more than likely reminded her of or represented the infant daughter she had lost in an accidental fire of her own making. When he glanced back up from the notes he had only just scribbled down about the raven-haired

woman, he was surprised to see that she was gone, seeming to have disappeared entirely.

Dr. Hopper's brows furrowed as he glanced around, his gaze darting from Patient Mills, who seemed entirely disinterested in everything around her as she picked at her nails and sighed in frequent intervals, to the tables where several patients were still eating, to the entrance of the rec library, to the shadows where Patient Swan hid, and back to Patient Mills. He saw not a hint or sign of the woman, which left him absolutely flabbergasted, until he heard the wind-up music of the jewelry box begin again, causing those same eerie chills to tingle on his spine and slither across his flesh. His eyes followed the sound of the music into the darkness where Patient Swan sat, only the knee of her leg visible in a tiny sliver of light, and he could only assume that Patient Blanchard had joined her there.

This assumption was almost instantly confirmed when a very soft, almost childlike voice drifted to him from a woman he could not see. "You are watching her again," the small voice echoed.

"Mother," he heard a gruffer voice sharply say, one he assumed to be that of Patient Swan. He wished the lights were working as he began to record notes, because seeing their facial expressions and body language would have helped him make deeper assessments; not to mention the fact that the chilling music of the jewelry box and the woman's childish voice seeping out of the darkness with nothing but shadows in sight while sitting inside an actual asylum for the criminally insane was creepy and discomforting beyond words.

"Merely an observation, darling," Patient Blanchard said, the sound of her voice pairing with the cranking of the jewelry box knob yet again. The tinkling melody drifted through the air once more as the pixie-haired woman then said, "You know she's evil."

"She is..." Patient Swan spoke quietly, pausing as if choosing her words carefully before finishing by saying, "...misunderstood."

"She has openly admitted to being evil, Emma," Patient Blanchard said, sounding like an eight-year-old at a Spelling Bee, spelling "definitively" very

matter-of-factly.

"Eh, she only says that because she wants people to be afraid of her," the blonde responded, dismissing the woman she referred to as "Mother". Dr. Hopper made a quick note of this, absolutely fascinated by the fact that Patient Swan seemed to be able to see through Patient Mills' defenses and understand the mechanisms people often used to keep others at arms' length or to lord power over others. The blonde was strangely grounded, which was surprising given her history of deranged violence and her own personal delusions about herself as some sort of "Savior".

"Ooookay," the pixie-haired woman sing-songed as she wound up the jewelry box again, "but you should really believe people when they say they are evil. It's like when people tell you they're hungry. You don't say, 'I'm hungry' and secretly mean, 'Be afraid! Be very afraid!' You just mean that you're hungry. It's the same thing. So, you should believe her when she says she's evil, because if she says she's evil then it means that she's evil...and maybe a little hungry."

Dr. Hopper's face scrunched as he chewed on the end of his pen and tried to make sense of the rambling bit of logic he had only just heard from the woman hidden within the shadows. He pulled his tape recorder up to his mouth and very quietly began to speak into it, saying, "Patient Blanchard seems to have regressed completely, reverting to childish demeanor and even speech, most likely in an attempt to provide some sense of life to the obviously distorted memory of the child she lost. She produces logic as a child would, speaking in circles and arguing with simplicity, which layered with her obvious affinity for and dependency upon children's toys (specifically female), serves only to further support the theory."

"Hmm, you make a fair point, MM," Patient Swan said, her voice sounding blatantly sarcastic, though Dr. Hopper was quite certain that Patient Blanchard was unable to detect it. It took him a moment before he was able to riddle out that "MM" most likely stood for Mary Margaret, and he was sure to note on his memo pad that Patient Swan did not refer to Patient Blanchard as "Mother" at all times, but as he had witnessed thus far, *did* always utilize a term that denoted affection, familiarity, or intimacy. It seemed, also, that Patient Swan was simply attempting to placate or please the pixie-haired

woman given her simple acceptance of Patient Blanchard's skewed and childish logic, as well as her unwillingness to argue with the childish woman.

"Patient Swan most likely seeks acceptance and familial love with Patient Blanchard, a theory that would have obvious roots in the patient's youth as an orphan, most especially if she was frequently shuffled from home to home," the doctor whispered into his tape recorder. "She fears abandonment and thus stifles her own opinions, to an extent, where Patient Blanchard is concerned."

"Ooh, M&M's sound delicious," Patient Blanchard chimed. "Perhaps when my family finds me, they will bring me a bag of them; the peanut ones, not the regular kind. The yellow M&M is so much funnier and cuter than the red one."

"I like the pretzel ones," Patient Swan added.

"There are no M&M's with pretzels in them, Emma," the raven-haired woman argued. She had been in the asylum for several years, so she was completely oblivious to many developments out in the real world, not the least of which was the introduction of pretzel M&M's. Patient Swan, however, was having only been in the asylum for two years. "Don't be silly."

"You're right, Mother," Patient Swan whispered. "There are no pretzel M&M's."

Patient Blanchard seemed to feel slightly guilty about shutting the blonde down, though, as she quickly and sweetly said, "If there were pretzel M&M's, though, I'm sure they'd be great."

"Definitely," Patient Swan agreed.

Dr. Hopper heard the woman cranking the knob on the jewelry box yet again before the tinkling sound filtered through the air once more, and then he heard a rustling and shuffling sound. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Patient Blanchard stepped out of the shadows, and without a word, walked off toward the cafeteria area of the rec hall. He found it rather strange that neither of the

women verbally acknowledged her leaving, though he simply accepted it as another level of familiarity between the two and jotted it down in his notes.

What absolutely caught his attention, however, was the fact that almost in the instant that Patient Blanchard had darted off toward the breakfast carts, the sultry voice of one Regina Mills drifted into the open air around them, a perfectly seductive whisper. "Savior," she called quietly, most likely having heard the blonde refer to herself by the title on more than one occasion; or perhaps they had verbally interacted many times before. The doctor could not be sure; at this point, he was merely making assumptions based on tiny observations. He could not actually *see* Patient Swan's reaction, but he *was* able to hear her breath audibly hitch in her throat.

There was a moment of completely stillness and silence between the two women as Patient Mills stared fiercely into the shadows where she knew Patient Swan to be hiding, and then the shuffling began. A minute later, long, ratty blonde locks, striking emerald eyes, and bulging biceps appeared as Emma Swan stepped forward from the dark, shadowy portion of the room and into the flickering fluorescent lights that shone upon the small walkway separating her shadowed side of the room from the rickety, makeshift throne. Patient Swan crossed her arms over her chest as the melted chocolate eyes of the woman upon the throne scanned slowly down her body, a single eyebrow just slightly twitching and lips pursing tightly.

Dr. Hopper's pen was scratching madly against his memo pad as he watched the silent exchange, the two women eyeing each other not only as if to size one another up but also almost...seductively. And then, Patient Mills spoke again. "Do you know who I am?" she asked in a low voice as her eyes almost glittered beneath the fluorescent lights and remained glued to the blonde.

Patient Swan said nothing as she simply nodded, her arms still crossed over her chest, biceps bulging as the position forced them to flex.

"And you know the things I've done?" the brunette drawled.

"You're famous," Patient Swan said, nodding again.

"Indeed," Patient Mills hummed, her eyebrow arching and a small yet pleased smile slipping across her lips. "All royals are, dear."

There was another tense moment of silence as they simply stared into one another, and then the brunette lifted a hand from the arm of her throne and crooked a finger at the blonde. "Come closer," she whispered.

Patient Swan stepped over so that she was standing just at the base of the book stairs, her emerald orbs fixed on the woman elevated before her. As soon as the blonde reached the throne, Patient Mills said, "Nearly every day for the last two months, you have gathered my breakfast for me, given me your apple slices, and made sure that I received only apple juice. Why is that, Savior? That is what you like to be called, is it not, *Savior*?"

"You can call me Emma," the blonde answered, leaning even further forward as if hypnotically drawn in by the woman's scent or voice, "and how do you know it was me?"

A soft chuckle escaped the brunette before she said, "My dear, I know *everything*."

Patient Swan shrugged as if she hadn't a care in the world and said, "Yeah, well, you like apples so..."

The other woman seemed unable to help her smile at that as she asked, "And you know this how?"

"Like I said," Swan reiterated, "you're famous. Everyone knows the story. After you cut your dad's heart out, you sautéed it with apples and caramel sauce and fed it to your dog. You told that lady that interviewed you on TV that you did it because apples were your favorite, and because they were delicious and health-conscious. I was only ten at the time I saw it on TV, but I thought it was pretty cool, because most of the families I'd lived with just fed their dogs that gross kibble shit that probably tastes like dirt."

Dr. Hopper's pen was a livewire as he watched Patient Mills' face cycle through a number of expressions in response to the blonde's statement--surprise, intrigue, awe, pleasure, curiosity--but what really struck him was

how flattered and truly touched the woman seemed to be in discovering that someone had paid such close attention and remembered details of her personality and personal likes so many years down the line. It was also quite interesting to discover that Patient Swan knew well of the notorious Regina Mills long before she became a patient at Storybrooke Asylum herself, despite the fact that she had only been a child when Mills' case had been in the widespread media. It only made the blonde's obsession with or strange attachment to Patient Mills all the more complex and intriguing.

"It seems you've taken quite the interest in me," the brunette said softly, obviously intrigued, as she suddenly leaned down and forward in her throne so that her face was but mere inches from the blonde's.

"Yeah," Patient Swan whispered softly enough that Dr. Hopper had to nearly come out of his seat as he strained to hear it. "You're pretty."

"They're mad, you know," a low voice sounded right next to the doctor's ear, causing him to jump nearly out of his skin as he dropped his memo pad, pen, and tape recorder. He turned quickly in his chair to find a young man terribly close to him, his head tilted, and his blue eyes watching him curiously. His sandy blondish-brown hair was ruffled and sticking up in several directions, and when he tilted his head the other way, the light caught the exposed flesh of his neck, and the doctor had to force himself not to gasp when he saw the long jagged scar that stretched across the man's neck from ear to ear as if he'd nearly been decapitated at one point in his life.

Dr. Hopper nodded to the man before quickly shuffling to pick up his things and turning back to face the sudden intruder. "Are you speaking of Patient Swan and Patient Mills?" he asked the curious young man.

"I am speaking of speaking of speaking," the man answered him, bobbling his head back and forth, "ooooooooooooof the one who saves and the one who doesn't, the one who was wicked and the one who wasn't, the yellow and the black, the knick and the knack, those two over there...making lovey, lovey eyes, doc."

"Uhh...." Dr. Hopper fumbled to find appropriate words, because it was quite clear that this man was severely off-kilter, which made him wonder just what

he had done to land himself in Ward Four specifically. The doctor almost shuddered at the thought. Still, he decided to indulge the patient in conversation, hoping he might learn something of previous interactions amongst some of the patients that his files had warned him would be truly difficult--Swan and Mills being two of the main cases in that category. "I see, and did you mean that they were mad as in angry?"

"Mad!" he hissed at the doctor in answer. "Mad, mad, mad! Mad as in cuuuuhhh-razy! Mad as in lost, mad. Scrambled brains and all of that, doc. Insane in the membrane. Deranged, loony, manic, nuts, cracked, cuckoo, Deeeeeeeeerailed!" He then pursed his lips and mimicked an English accent as he pressed his index finger to his chin, squinted his eyes, and in a monotone voice said, "Mad...to be of unsound mind." And then he snapped right back to normal.

"Okay, yes, I understand," Dr. Hopper told him, hoping he would calm down.
"How did you know I was a doctor?"

"Only doctors doctor, doctor!" the young man answered. "Recording and noting and observing. We, sir, are your lab rats, sir, and you sir, are our scientist, sir. Do you see?"

"Indeed," Dr. Hopper answered, surprised that he actually did follow what the man was saying. "What is your name?"

"My name? MY NAAAAME?!" the patient asked as if completely and utterly offended by the question, his voice raising several octaves, but then he simply reverted right back to normal and said, "Jefferson. That's me. Jefferson, like the 3rd President, and stooooooopppp. Stop looking at my neck, doc."

"I apologize," Dr. Hopper choked out, embarrassed at having been caught. "I was simply curious."

"Hmm, yes, curious," Jefferson repeated in a mockingly pompous voice as he tapped at his chin. "Curiouser and curioser were you, Alice? Hmm...yes. Well, you see, you're welcome to be curious in the brain, sir, but not in the eyes, sir. If you're curious in the eyes, then everyone can see and when

everyone can see how curious you might be, then your curiosity can be used against you." He sing-songed the last bit, waggling his finger at the doctor in perfect rhythm with this words.

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked him, completely confused by the logic.

"I mean exactly what I said," Jefferson told him exasperatedly. "What do *you* mean?"

"I haven't said anything," Dr. Hopper answered.

"Ah, yes, I see your point," Jefferson said, nodding animatedly. "But perhaps that's your problem, doc. You're too quiet, and you know the monsters live in the silence."

"What silence?" the doctor asked, trying his best to jot down the things that the mad patient was saying to him. "What monsters?"

"Oh now, now, doc, the monsters," Jefferson exclaimed. "You know...you know the monsters. I know you know the monsters and I know you know the monsters know you. And they live in the silence, the silence of a heart carved out of a chest, its drumming stopped once it exited the breast. That is the silence they live in, they do. And the quieter you are, the more silent will you be too."

"Are you suggesting that I will go mad as well?" Dr. Hopper asked, intrigued by the notion though slightly offended as he jotted it down into his notes. When he glanced back up after realizing that Jefferson had grown strangely silent, he was met with calculating blue eyes digging into his own, and though he didn't understand why, the look in Jefferson's eyes absolutely made the doctor's skin crawl.

"I'm saying," Jefferson whispered coldly as he swooped in even closer to the doctor so that their faces were mere inches apart, "that we are *all* mad here."

Chapter 4: Tale As Old As Time

A/N: Hello again, everyone. I noticed that I had a few people ask if the curse is real in this story, and I wanted to clarify that the curse does NOT exist in this story. It is entirely AU.

I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of the theme song from the horror movie *One Missed Call*. Give it a try. Enjoy! XO-Chrmddpoet

Chapter Four: Tale As Old As Time

Chills rippled down the doctor's spine as the truly mad patient, Jefferson, hovered just in front of his face, eyes cold and promising. He could not recall another time in which he had felt so truly intimidated by one of the mentally ill before. It wasn't that the doctor feared for his life in the presence of the sandy-haired young man. It was that he feared for his soul, though he was unable to understand the sensation of that fear. He could not quite put his finger on it, on the explanation for the way his flesh prickled and his heart hammered, for the way a thousand morbid possibilities and images of a life spent in an asylum very like the one he was now in flashed through his mind.

Nausea roared in his gut as he swallowed thickly, though he held the man's gaze. He knew better than to back down or look away. All that that would effectively communicate was that Jefferson was in control, and Jefferson needed to know that he certainly was *not* in control. One of the primary rules of dealing with the criminally insane was never allowing a patient to gain the upper hand, to seize power. It could mean the difference between living and dying, and that was not an exaggeration.

Just as the tension between their stares became near unbearable, the doors of the rec hall burst open and a woman's voice echoed loudly through the long room as she screeched, "You have to tell me when the next full moon is!"

Both Jefferson and the doctor shifted to see the cause of the commotion, and Dr. Hopper automatically assumed that based on the woman's cry about the full moon, that this was the unique Ruby Lucas that Mr. Gold had told him

about. He jotted down a few notes quickly while Jefferson was distracted, and he hoped that he would have a chance to observe her more closely during recreation that morning, because he would be lying if he claimed not to be utterly enthralled with her case. Clinical lycanthropy was really rather rare, but always fascinating, and it seemed Miss Lucas had quite the extreme case of it.

"Calm down, Lucas," one of the orderlies commanded as he and another gripped her by the arms and pushed her inside.

"I will not calm down!" Patient Lucas shouted. "Don't you get it? I can't be around people when it's the full moon! My transformations are violent! People could get hurt! Is that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to relax," the orderly said, his thick Bostonian accent decorating the words. "You know morning rec is mandatory. So get in there and don't even think about runnin' off again. I don't wanna have to hunt you down."

"But the full moon!" she argued, glancing wildly around as she struggled against the orderlies, her voice growing into an almost puppy-like whine.

"The full moon is at night, Lucas," the other orderly told her, trying to calm her down enough that they could let her go and not have to worry about her making a break for the doors. "It's the middle of the morning. You'll be fine."

Strangely enough, the doctor noticed, the woman almost instantly calmed down. All of her muscles relaxed and she easily pulled herself out of the orderlies' grips. "Oh," she said as if suddenly everything was entirely okay. "Cool."

Dr. Hopper almost laughed out loud as the tall and rather striking brunette then shrugged her shoulders, cracked her neck to the side, and held her hands out as if to gather everyone's attentions. She cleared her throat and very loudly announced, "People, it's okay. There's no need to panic. I've just been informed that it is, in fact, morning and not night, so rest assured that I won't eat *any* of you."

When all of the other patients simply nodded or mumbled their acceptance, Patient Lucas grinned as if thoroughly satisfied and said, "Cool. Carry on then."

Dr. Hopper watched as Patient Lucas then quickly made her way toward the boxed in area of the rec hall that appeared to be a small library. He found this rather curious, but was hardly one to make assumptions without any foundation. Perhaps Patient Lucas simply liked to read, but just before she reached the little library, another brunette's head poked out of the open entryway between the bookshelves. The doctor sat up a little straighter as he watched Patient Lucas's face split into a wide smile upon seeing the young brunette woman, but then they were gone. They disappeared together inside the giant cube of books, and Hopper was left to make senseless theories in his notes as Jefferson sat on the floor in front of him and watched like a hawk.

The doctor sighed as he jotted down a few of his observations, making a mark on the page so that he would know whose file to later place them in, and whispered to himself, "Simply fascinating."

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, Dr. Hopper nearly fell out of his chair, jumping and even yelping as Jefferson's voice boomed into the air, loud and echoing. The young man was singing as if his life depended on it. Hopper's head shot up to stare curiously at him as the sandy-haired patient clutched a hand to his chest and in a surprisingly heartfelt manner and shockingly in tune, belted out, "TALE AS OLD AS TIME! SONG AS OLD AS RHYME! BEAUTY AND THE BEAST!"

"Are you a fan of that movie, Jefferson?" Dr. Hopper asked as he stared curiously at the man who had nearly scared the life out of him through song.

"What movie?" Jefferson asked sincerely, cocking his head at the doctor and pursing his lips.

"Beauty and the Beast, of course," the doctor answered.

"That is not a movie, sir," the mad patient told him, which both surprised and confused Hopper. He quickly jotted down a few notes before looking up at

Jefferson again just as the young man went on to dramatically flourish a hand through the air and say, "No, no, no, good sir, tis not a movie at all."

"Then what is it?" Hopper asked, making sure to write down the gist of everything Jefferson was saying.

"Tis but a song, sir," he answered, continuing with his dramatic flourishes, language, and flair, "a song of my own creation, sir!"

"Right," Dr. Hopper said, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of the claim. He had heard so many far-fetched things from deluded patients during his career that few things ever truly surprised him. Jefferson, though, was quite the unique patient. He had never encountered anyone quite like him and found him equally intriguing, entertaining, and terrifying. "And what, may I ask, was your inspiration for writing such a ballad?"

"Ah, you may ask," Jefferson said, bobbling his head, "but that does not mean that I will answer."

"It is a harmless question," Dr. Hopper told him, waving a hand nonchalantly to emphasize his point.

"And hooooooow do you know?" Jefferson threw out. "You cannot know if no harm has been done to you or to I or to anyone."

"Very well," the doctor said as he sighed and scribbled a few more notes onto his memo pad.

A tense silence grew between the doctor and the patient as they simply stared at one another, Jefferson's wide blue eyes practically devouring the man in front of him as if he was trying to drill into the doctor's brain and consume every thought. After several long moments, though, the sandy-haired patient smacked his lips loudly together and said, "You know, doc, not all questions have an answer."

"Yes, of that I am quite aware," Dr. Hopper answered matter-of-factly. He was a doctor of the mentally ill. If *anyone* was painfully aware of questions without answers, it was he.

"Well then you know," Jefferson said simply. He then sighed so dramatically that it almost made the good doctor laugh. "There is no need to be so sad, doc. I only deny you your answers because I am mad, doc. But if you have to know, if you want to sing, then you simply must observe the thing!"

"Observe what thing?" Dr. Hopper asked, even more confused than before.

"The thing! The thing!" the young man chanted. "Geez doc, can't you keep up?"

"Apparently not," the doctor said, laughing a bit. "Perhaps you could explain?"

"Perhaps I could," Jefferson continued. "Perhaps I couldn't. I most likely will even though I wouldn't. The thing of which you want to know is the way the beast prefers the beauty's row...of books, that is."

Hopper simply stared at the man in utter confusion, before things began to click in his head. Realization dawned on him that Jefferson's "beast" was a reference to Patient Lucas, who believed herself to be a werewolf. A werewolf, after all, would certainly be considered a beast. That would mean that the other woman, the shorter brunette that he had glimpsed at the opening of the library, was the "beauty." He flipped quickly through his notes as something he couldn't quite place niggled at his brain, and finally he came across the notes he had jotted down from the previous night when he had settled into his living quarters and recorded all that Mr. Gold had told him.

The doctor's index finger ran along the page with the lines of his sentences as he read swiftly, and then suddenly he was tapping a specific section and exclaiming, "Aha!"

His finger was resting on the name of one of the patients Gold had pointed out to him the previous night. "Belle," the doctor whispered to himself as he tapped the name. It was a name that literally meant "beauty" and suddenly everything clicked into place and made perfect sense. However, was Jefferson implying that there was some sort of relationship taking placing between Patients Lucas and French?

"Ah yes, the beauty," Jefferson said knowingly, having heard the doctor whisper Patient French's name. "You know her?"

"Not quite," Dr. Hopper answered, shaking his head.

"What a shame!" Jefferson exclaimed. "The beauty carries on such intriguing and insightful conversations, doc!"

"I was told she didn't speak," the doctor said, double-checking his notes just to be sure. He found it only seconds later, the short section that mentioned Patient French's silence, only solidifying his confusion.

"EXACTLY!" he exclaimed. "You DO know her!"

"Jefferson!" a familiar voice barked from only a short distance away, and both men glanced up to see Patient Mills staring in their direction.

"Gotta go, doc," Jefferson quickly said, his eyes going wide as he scrambled madly to his feet. "All the world bows or falls when the seductive voice of Queenie calls!" He then darted swiftly away, practically tripping over himself in his effort to get to the so-called "Evil Queen."

The doctor shook his head confusedly as he watched the man go, and it was only then that he noticed Patient Swan's absence. She was no longer standing before or conversing with Patient Mills, and so Hopper quickly scanned the rec hall only to find the blonde seated comfortably on a leaning chair in front of a poker table. She, Patient Blanchard, and two other patients that the doctor was unable to recognize seemed to be playing some form of poker with what looked to be a half-chewed deck of cards. It also appeared, based on the pile in the center of the table, that they were playing for quite the disturbing prize--an assortment of items really, from a piece of string to what Dr. Hopper was fairly certain was the crust of a slice of bread, to a half-smoked cigarette, to a (thankfully unused) tampon, to a tiny figurine of what looked like maybe Gumby or something similar.

Dr. Hopper, still shaking his head, scratched out a few notes about the odd poker game, tabbing it for both Patient Blanchard's and Patient Swan's files. He supposed it was hardly relevant; however, he had learned throughout the

years to record *everything* when it came to the mentally ill. All that seemed irrelevant almost always had the potential to be more relevant than one ever realized. It was one of the truly unique aspects of working with the clinically insane.

Once he was finished with the few notes, he quickly gathered his things and tried to be seen as little as possible as he made his way across the rec hall and over to the small library area. He wanted a chance to observe Patient Lucas as well as Patient French, and he knew them both to be hiding out in the mostly private area. The doctor nodded to the two orderlies who stood at attention just inside the opening of the library area as he ducked inside and made his way through the rows, seeking out the two patients. When he came to the next-to-last row, he stopped quickly and dropped to the floor, pressing his back to the shelf and pulling out his memo pad and tape recorder once more. He could hear the now-familiar voice of Patient Lucas coming from the final row, and he did not want to startle either of the women by making his presence known, so he shuffled quietly to the very edge of his row and peeked around the last shelf while keeping most of his body hidden.

"Do you know what I mean?" Patient Lucas asked softly as she nudged the other woman's shoulder. She was met with nothing but silence, so the doctor was surprised when the taller brunette then said, "See! Wow, you totally get me. It's amazing."

Dr. Hopper excitedly scribbled this down in his notes, wondering if perhaps the two women interacted enough (in their own way) to have developed some form of communication that did not actually require Patient French to vocally respond; perhaps a system of facial expressions or hand gestures. Perhaps Patient French communicated through written word. Dr. Hopper strained his neck up so he could see a bit better, attempting to confirm whether or not the shorter brunette was indeed holding pen and paper or something similar and providing written responses. He was somewhat disappointed to discover that she, in fact, did not.

It was then that the doctor realized just how truly difficult communicating with Patient French during individual sessions was going to be. He quickly jotted down a single note next to her name, though, that he hoped would result

in progress throughout the next month. *Patient Lucas--the key to communicating with French?*

"Listen, Belle, I know we've only been having these meetings for a little while," Patient Lucas said quietly, almost timidly Dr. Hopper noted, "but I feel like there's just something between us. Do you feel it? Of course you feel it. How could you not? It's like when I feel the moon calling to me. You just can't ignore it, right? Right. So, anyway, I just want you to know that I'm not going to like, eat you or whatever. I mean, not like in the food kind of way."

Dr. Hopper felt heat spill into his cheeks as his face heavily flushed at hearing the innuendo-laced remark echo from Patient Lucas's lips, her voice going an octave or so lower. He quickly scribbled down in his notes that some form of inappropriate relationship had indeed developed or was in the process of developing between the two patients. As he was writing, he heard Patient Lucas speak up again, which only had his blush deepening.

"And don't worry," she said comfortingly as she patted Patient French's hand affectionately, "my fangs only come out when I transform." She then winked at the smaller brunette, and Dr. Hopper decided that it was probably better if he excused himself sooner rather than later. He quickly gathered his things and exited the library portion of the rec hall as if all the air had been sucked from that small area and he was in desperate need of oxygen.

He nearly slammed into one of the patients as he practically sprinted from the area, and his breath instantly hitched in his throat when the patient slowly turned, and Dr. Hopper realized that he had just come face to face for the first time with none other than the infamous Regina Mills. He was shocked to not only see the woman off of her throne but to also have her only inches from his face. It was then that he realized just how captivating the woman's melted chocolate eyes were.

Patient Mills locked onto the doctor's gaze as a slow smirk spread across her lips and she practically purred, "Well, well, well, if it isn't the latest bug that needs squashing."

Dr. Hopper swallowed thickly as he wiped one sweaty palm on his pant leg, cleared his throat, and held out his hand, saying, "Regina Mills, my name is

Dr. Archie Hopper. I will be conducting a few sessions with you throughout the next month."

Patient Mills merely arched an eyebrow at the doctor, glancing down to his open and waiting hand but never taking it in her own. Chills shot down Hopper's spine as the woman locked gazes with him once more and soft laughter slithered across her supple lips. "Bow," she commanded with an authority that the doctor would never have expected to be present or prominent within such a quietly spoken word.

He shook his head quickly, swallowing thickly once more, and said, "Miss Mills, I hardly find that appropriate. I was just on my way out, but I will certainly see you in session soon. Good day to you."

Dr. Hopper knew better than to let the conversation carry on or linger when the woman was surrounded by mostly only other patients; not to mention the fact that simply from what he had observed only that morning, the doctor had easily come to the conclusion that Regina Mills was a woman that absolutely thrived on power. As such, he knew that it was even more crucial than usual that he not allow her to claim it.

The woman's soft, spine-tingling laughter filtered through the air again as she held up a hand in front of him and with an edge to her voice, said, "Perhaps you didn't hear me, bug. I said, 'Bow'."

Before the doctor could even process what was happening, a flash of blonde hair appeared just to the side of him, muscled biceps rippled as hands latched onto his shoulder, and in an instant he was being forced to his knees before the satisfied smirk of the notorious Black Beauty. His entire body trembled as he glanced up just in time to see the hardened face of Patient Swan staring adoringly at Patient Mills even as the blonde's hands gripped into his shoulders and held him down before the shouts of orderlies ripped through the room and flooded the doctor with relief.

Four different orderlies rushed forward, all of them grabbing onto Patient Swan and yanking her away from the doctor as if they knew it would require all of their combined strength to hold her back. It instantly made Dr. Hopper wonder what sort of incidents had occurred in the last two years to lead them

to believing as much. He hoped whatever had happened, if anything, had been recorded in her file. He had not yet had a chance to read every detail of every file, but he certainly intended on getting there.

"Stop resisting, Patient!" one of the orderlies shouted as they struggled with Patient Swan. He either hadn't learned the woman's name yet or was simply trying to siphon away her power by dehumanizing her a bit. Dr. Hopper noted this in his mind as he watched from the floor, familiar with the tactic as it was utilized throughout many prisons and asylums across the country.

"I DON'T ANSWER TO MY SLAVE NAME, YOU DICKS!" Patient Swan shouted as she kicked and flailed, her foot effectively making hard contact with one of the orderlies' jaws. The man instantly blacked out, limply dropping to the floor just a few feet away from the doctor.

"I need a shot!" one of the other orderlies shouted, and just a few minutes later, another orderly rushed forward and practically jammed a syringe into Patient Swan's bicep, almost like the damn thing was a dart and he was playing to win.

"Fuck me!" the blonde cursed as she hissed at the pain, and literally within seconds, her limbs began to loosen and go limp. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly and then she passed out in the orderlies arms.

Dr. Hopper breathed a sigh of relief as he was helped to his feet by yes another orderly, but he was unable to take his eyes off of the brunette in front of him. She had been watching Patient Swan with what could only be described as deep concern in her eyes, which absolutely intrigued the doctor, but then she turned on him once more. There was suddenly a raging fire in her now blackened orbs that make his skin crawl, though he could not deny that the woman had a certain magnetism about her, even in her wickedness; it was as if she was constantly pulling everyone toward her, latching onto whatever would draw a person out and using it to bring them into obedience. She smiled at Hopper as he straightened out his suit jacket and patted away the dirt and dust that now coated the knees of his pants. It was a cold smile, one that stayed with the doctor long after he had exited the rec hall and made his way down to his own living quarters to map out his notes and dive further into his work.

He shivered involuntarily as he sat at the small desk in his room in the asylum and jotted down a single note, a question, in the file labeled *R. Mills*. As soon as he was done scratching out the note, he reached for the small tumbler of whiskey sitting on his desk and took a long swig. He leaned back in his chair then and stared at what he had just written, the possibility causing chills to shoot once more down his spine.

Regina Mills--sane?

Chapter 5: Whispers and Warnings

A/N: You absolutely, positively HAVE to read this chapter to my chosen soundtrack. The theme song from the classic horror movie *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. It has a chilling effect on the chapter, and you won't want to miss out on that.

I hope you all enjoy this chapter. We're going to start delving into several of the individual characters in the coming chapters, primarily Emma, Regina, MM, Belle, and Ruby, and the SQ interaction will begin to grow rapidly as we go.

I hope you will all review and let me know what you think. Thank you for all of your support and encouragement. I truly appreciate it. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Five: Whispers and Warnings

The corridors were dark and frigidly cold as Hopper quietly made his way through Ward Four. His fingers were knotted together in the hem of his sweater vest as he attempted to rub some friction into them to shake away the numbness. Stomach twisting uncomfortably, he glanced in every direction, though all he saw were heavy iron doors and shadows, and all he heard was the silence of insanity as it pulsed and pulsed and pulsed around him. He couldn't even remember how he had gotten there, immersed in the dark quiet of Ward Four in the dead of night.

He had only to contemplate on the silence for mere seconds before it began to mutate around him, vibrating just outside his range of hearing as if it were building to the point of being audible, and then it broke. Whispers erupted around him as if they were seeping through the very walls, calling out to him from the madness within each padded cell. They made his skin crawl, prickle uncomfortably as he continued to shuffle throughout the ward.

Where are the orderlies? He thought to himself, the words echoing inside his mind like thunder as his reserved discomfort began to grow, manipulated by

his surroundings and by his inability to determine or recall the reason for his presence there. It grew and it grew, and within seconds, his discomfort had taken the form of controlled panic and his controlled panic had then taken the form of chilling fear.

The whispers dilated and amplified, devouring the open corridor as Dr. Hopper forced every stumbled step forward. Something kept him moving, perhaps his fear or his curiosity, though he could explain neither. He attempted to distinguish the words of the whispers, but he could isolate nothing. It seemed the whispers were but sounds--no words, no thoughts, no purpose, and yet he felt compelled to understand.

He came to a junction, his gaze traveling to the right and then to the left. His decision felt vital, though he could not determine the reason, and as he made to turn his head to the right once more, a flash of movement caught his eye. His head snapped quickly to the left once more, and his heart stilled in his chest, but surely his eyes had deceived him. A flash of moment, a flicker of a shadow shaped as a human being, darting the width of the corridor and then quickly out of sight. It had happened so quickly that the doctor could not help but to question himself.

Perhaps it was simple trickery, a mere shift in the shadows, having only taken shape in his imagination and fueled by his obvious discomfort. Perhaps it was exhaustion dancing playfully on his pupils and in his mind, for it was the middle of the night and he had yet to discover why he found himself out of his bed and stalking the corridors of Storybrooke Asylum's notorious Ward Four. Perhaps it was an orderly simply making his rounds.

The doctor cycled through the most logical explanations even as his mind, riddled with fear, urged him toward far more daunting possibilities. He reached up slowly and pulled his glasses from his face, dropping them down to the hem of his sweater and beneath to the smooth material of his button-down shirt; he could not even recall dressing himself. He swiped the lenses clean before returning his glasses to his face, and staring into the darkened distance of the long corridor.

"Hello?" he quietly called, hoping an orderly would answer.

"Hello." A whisper called out in echo from far behind him. He whirled on the spot as adrenaline shot into his veins, only to see another shadowed figure dart across the width of the opposite corridor in much the same way as the one prior, and then it was gone. The hair on the back of his neck and along the length of his arms stood at attention as he strained once more to see in the distance.

"Who's there?" he called again, just as quietly, suddenly afraid to allow his voice to carry too far. He was afraid of being alone there, as his fear tickled ominously in his gut at the back of his neck, but he was more afraid, he believed, of discovering that he was, in fact, anything but.

"Who's there?" the echoed returned to him in a whisper, though this time from the same direction, the one in which he was still currently facing. Against his better judgment, the doctor followed the sound, his body trembling from the temperature as well as from his rising state of unease. Was it possible that one of the patients had somehow managed to find a way out of his or her cell?

The whispers died into silence once more as he crept down the corridor, his shoulder pressed to one of the walls, sliding along slowly. His eyes darted in every direction, alert for any further signs of movement. Nothing could prepare him, though, for the sick chills that rippled across his flesh and down his timid spine when he passed in front of the large, iron door of one of the cells only to hear the person within call out to him quietly.

"You are part of the game now," the voice spoke in a knowing whisper. It was so quiet that the doctor was unable to even determine if it was a man or a woman speaking. He turned toward the small window of the door only to see dark, wide eyes staring back at him as the patient's face was pressed fully against the glass. "The game is not for everyone," the person spoke again, the volume increasing just enough that the doctor was able to assume that it was a man speaking.

"What game?" Dr. Hopper asked quietly in return, searching those dark eyes that seemed only to stretch into a black infinity.

"The game you will lose," he answered with certainty, "if you keep playing."

The doctor was so accustomed to cryptic conversation, having made his living speaking with mentally ill persons on a daily basis that he had learned to simply play along at times. He let his gaze dart quickly from side to side to ensure that he was quite alone, chills still running like broken echoes across his flesh. The look in the patient's eyes made him uneasy and the words he spoke only served to amplify the doctor's fear.

Choosing to play along, the doctor quietly asked, "How do you know I will lose?"

The answering whisper was timid but powerful as the patient, voice trembling, replied, "She always wins." A thick and haunting silence developed between them even through the heavy material of the iron that separated their bodies. It curled around Hopper's limbs like binding ropes of ominous promise, and then the dark eyes of the man before him shifted, glancing to a spot just over the doctor's right shoulder as he reiterated, "She always wins," before quickly retreating, as if frightened, back into the shadows of his cell.

Dr. Hopper, having noticed the shift in the man's gaze and the fear it elicited, turned quickly on the spot, his heart already hammering madly within his chest. However, when he whirled around, the corridor was empty but for himself. He was alone, not a single other soul in sight. He placed a hand to his chest and rubbed, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm himself as he slipped further along the corridor, his gaze still darting around wildly.

"Hello?" he called out again, this time a bit louder so that his voice reverberated in a soft echo.

A low, seductive, yet chilling laugh rippled into the air around him and instantly made his stomach lurch. "Bug," the familiar voice snapped before the laughter spilled into the atmosphere once more. Fear unlike any he had ever felt in his life spilled into the doctor's chest and raged as a beast against his ribcage as he pressed himself tightly against the wall. His gaze darted quickly to the right and then to the left, and that was when he saw it--the silhouette.

It was a perfectly formed shadow standing at the end of the long corridor to his left, the shape absolutely recognizable yet not matching the familiar voice that still rang in his ears. His eyes traced the black outline of the silhouette--long, wild hair, muscled arms, offensive stance. The shadowed figure of Emma Swan stood still and silent a safe distance from him, though he had no doubt that the woman was watching him. He could feel her eyes locked on him in the dark as if he were the gazelle being silently stalked by the lion.

"P-Patient Swan..." he stammered quietly, though he knew the echo would reach the motionless woman. "How...how did you...you are not supposed to be out of your room." He tried to keep his voice steady, but in that very moment, Dr. Hopper was picturing nothing more than the end of his life. He had never felt fear as he did then, a fear that felt as a second skin, tightening possessively with every breath.

"I am the Savior," the soft, low lilt of Swan's voice vibrated along the distance between them, the words so potent that they seemed to creep along the corridor and drip from the ceiling above the doctor, splashing down onto his flesh and painting him with their promise.

A ripple of whispered echoes called out to him in that moment from the dozens of patient cells that littered the maze of corridors in Ward Four, and it was as if each and every echo sliced down the doctor's spine, reminding him that his fear was well founded.

"The Savior." "The Savior." "The Savior." "The Savior." "The Savior."

As the echoes taunted him, he turned to look to the patient's silhouette only to watch as it finally moved, the shadow of an arm disappearing behind a back. A hissing swipe of metal rang out through the air, setting the doctor's teeth on edge, and then he saw it, glinting in the shadows. The silhouette of the savior now seemed hauntingly complete as what appeared to be the blade of a sword now settled at her side.

Dr. Hopper swallowed thickly in that moment as bile rose in his throat and beads of sweat were born atop his brow. He had absolutely no idea of how to escape the moment, the place in which he felt so utterly trapped that he could hardly breathe. In every direction, he saw only darkness, hopelessness

leaking forward from it and biting at his flesh. Never had he imagined that one of the patients would find a way to escape her cell, and here he was, facing her and the reality that her escape most likely promised. Emma Swan was a deadly recluse, and it seemed that Dr. Hopper had somehow found his way into her web.

"Run," the quiet voice of another patient whispered, calling out to him from a cell just to his right. Another echoed the first's words, and then another, before a fourth finally said, "Run. She is coming."

It was then that a sharp tapping began to echo through the corridors, a tapping that sounded remarkably like the steady clicking of high heels. The doctor wasted no time then. He took a heavy breath and then sprang off of the wall, sprinting to his right and whipping around a corridor, desperate to map his way back to the elevator or to the stairs. That seductive and familiar laugh rang out around him again as if the haunting voice of Regina Mills lived in the very walls. "Bug," she snapped again, though he could see nothing as his shoes pounded into the floor and his eyes darted in every direction, frequently glancing over his shoulder as he ran.

"Bug," the mirrored response rang out as patients repeated her call. "Bug."
"Bug." "Bug." "Bug."

"The Savior." "The Savior." "The Savior." "The Savior."

"Run." "Run." "Run."

"Bug." "The Savior." "Run." "The Savior." "Bug." "Run."

Every reverberation felt as an assault on the doctor's body and on his senses as he ran for his life, fear writhing on his flesh like pricking needles with every pounding step. Shadowed movement flickered in front of him and behind him as the whispers continued to circulate the corridors and the laughter prickled at his skin and at his mind. Every few seconds, as he weaved through the maze of corridors, he heard that familiar sliding hiss of a sword's metal almost as if it were upon him, eager to cut and carve him, and it only made his pace quicken, his panic grow.

The whispers ripened, thickened, and grew until they were nearly as screams around him, flooding into his ears so loudly that it felt as if his eardrums would shatter at any moment and his brain would melt inside the vibrations and leak down the sides of his neck. His breathing was sharp and burned painfully in his lungs as he pushed himself to move faster, to run further until he could find some form of escape, because the madness around him seemed to be amplifying even as it narrowed into a choking hold on his body. The sounds and the flickers of movement and the promises of something far darker than he dared to imagine built as deep and heavy sobs in his tightened, itching throat before they were released into the shadows in a desperate plea for survival.

And then he saw it, the elevator.

The rickety, old contraption that had once made him wary now danced in front of him like a blessed vow of salvation. He shot forward, desperate to reach its old wooden door and escape into the safety within. Just as its door's small handle came within grasping distance, however, the doctor felt heavy hands slam into his back, balling into fists that sank into his sweater, before jerking him backward. A high-pitched yelp escaped him as he was whirled on the spot and thrown to the cold floor of Ward Four.

"Help!" the doctor called out as a last resort. "Somebody, please!"

A cool, haunting laugh spilled into the air from just above him and the doctor turned to gaze up into the face of the person who had ruthlessly thrown him to the ground. The silhouette of a thin man hovered just before him, his head adorned with what appeared to be a tall top hat, and then suddenly the man moved. He dropped to floor just in front of the doctor, his face pushing until it was only inches from Hopper's own, their breaths mingling as the familiar features of Jefferson clarified and he whispered, "What did I tell you? We are *all* mad here." He then let out a high-pitched cackle of a laugh right in the doctor's face before his features turned cold and cruel, his lip curling into a snarl.

Jefferson then rolled to the side, dropping to his back as he held onto his hat and laughed hysterically, only to reveal the waiting silhouette behind him and

the gleam of a sword rising in the air. The doctor let out a chilling scream as the blade came down, and then everything suddenly faded to black.

A bone-chilling gasp wrenched through the air as Dr. Hopper jolted upright in his bed, his hand shooting to his heart as his legs kicked and thrashed where they were tangled in thin white sheets. His linens were soaked with sweat and his hands dug into them to brace himself as the doctor glanced around to see nothing more than the familiar décor of the small living quarters provided him by the asylum. He was safe. It had all been a terrible dream.

With his pulse still throbbing in his ears and his breath as a shallow pant in his lungs, he shifted and pushed himself off of the bed. He tugged at his pajama shirt where it had ridden up in his restless struggle during sleep and made his way over to the large mirror that hung above the dresser across from his bed. He flicked on a lamp and then braced his hands on the dresser as he stared at his reflection. His eyes were dilated and his cheeks were flushed, his forehead speckled with beads of sweat.

Dr. Hopper closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath before leaning forward just enough to press his heated forehead to the cool, reflective pane of glass. He sighed heavily as he let the feeling soothe him, though it did little to chase the quiet echoes of fear that still rippled in his gut. In a quiet whisper, he acknowledged his unease, though he knew he was being paranoid, foolish.

"It didn't feel like a dream."

Dr. Hopper settled wearily into the corner of the fourth ward's recreation hall, the same position he had posted himself in during the previous day. He was to begin individual sessions with patients later that afternoon, which left his morning free for silent observation. As he pulled his tape recorder and memo pad from his briefcase, he took a moment to swipe at his face and rub at his eyes. Exhaustion weighed heavily on him as he had been unable to return to sleep the previous night after waking from such a vivid and haunting dream. Still, he had a job to perform and only a month to succeed, thus there was no room to be had for exhaustion. He simply had to make do with what

he had, running on the last little drops of adrenaline and energy that his body had to offer that morning.

The rec hall was already full by the time he had arrived, and he could feel the stares of the patients boring into him as he had made his way swiftly through the room and to the back corner just opposite Patient Mills' makeshift throne. Since the moment he sat down, busying himself with his preparations, he could feel her eyes on him. Dark chocolate pools that watched him so closely it was as if his very breath was beneath her microscope. He shook off the chills such a stare elicited, however, and began his own professional observation of the patients.

He scribbled down theories and took note of specific quirks from certain patients as he watched them meander around and interact, nothing out of the ordinary it seemed, and nothing that seemed terribly significant. That was, however, until he noticed a patient approaching him cautiously. The doctor watched as Patient Lucas slowly skipped her way forward into the shadows of his corner, her long brown hair twisted around her fingers as she bit her lip and locked gazes with him. When she reached his chair, she dropped down so that she was simply sitting on the floor beside the legs of his chair and looking up at him.

"You're a doctor, right?" She asked.

"I am," he told her, smiling gently to encourage a conversation.

"And you know that I'm like...a werewolf, right?

His smile grew a bit at that as he indulged the woman and said, "Yes, of course."

"Whoa," Patient Lucas whispered in surprise. "Why haven't you tried to like fix me or something then?"

Dr. Hopper chuckled heartily at that and asked, "Do you believe you can be fixed, Miss Lucas?"

"Miss Lucas?" she reiterated, her lip curling in disgust. "Gross, I'm not old. My name is Ruby. Call me Ruby."

"Very well, Ruby," Dr. Hopper said with a respectful nod. "Do you believe you can be fixed?"

"I don't know, man," she scoffed, rolling her eyes. "I'm not the friggin' doctor, here."

"Do you not enjoy being a wolf?" Dr. Hopper asked, still smiling at the blunt manner of the young woman.

"Eh, it's cool sometimes, but I just don't like that I could like really hurt someone, you know?"

The doctor was surprised at how truly vulnerable the brunette appeared in that moment, the past dancing in her brown eyes and coated in remorse. "I can understand that," he told her softly. "It is a truly terrible way to live, knowing that you could hurt the people you care about against your will."

"Wow!" Patient Lucas exclaimed. "You totally get me! That's amazing."

Dr. Hopper's brow furrowed as the familiar words niggled at his brain before he remembered that he had only just heard Patient Lucas say almost those exact words to Patient French the day before. He jotted that down in his notes, only to find himself scribbling more frantically when the brunette carried on with her end of the conversation, and he found those words just as familiar and just as embarrassing.

"You know," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, "I feel like there might be something between us. Do you feel it? I mean, you have to feel it, right? It's like when I feel the moon calling to me. You just can't ignore it, you know? Listen, I know we don't know each other that well yet, doc, but I want you to know that I'll do my best not to eat you or whatever, though I can think of other things I could do to you with my mouth. And don't worry, my fangs only come out when I transform."

Dr. Hopper's entire face turned a brilliant crimson in that moment as he gripped tightly to the edges of his clipboard, cleared his throat, and said, "You know, you and I have session tomorrow afternoon together and we will talk then, but for now why don't you just go and enjoy your recreation hour. How does that sound?"

"Yeah, that's cool," the patient responded as she hopped up to her feet. She then leaned in, far too close for the doctor's comfort, and whispered, "See you tomorrow, doc." She winked seductively at him before she turned and skipped quickly away.

Hopper let out an uneasy breath as he tapped his pen against his clipboard before pulling his tape recorder to his mouth and quietly speaking into it. "Patient Lucas is perhaps not the key to communicating with Patient French after all. It is possible given recent developments that a relationship has neither developed nor *is* developing between the two patients as it appears Patient Lucas suffers from compulsive lust and or an elevated libido. This could be due to attachment issues or could be a result of the animalistic nature she believes herself to have. Such a revelation reveals that her attachment is to the sensation and not to any one person in particular. Further observation is required to gain more insight into this development as well as to determine with certainty whether a connection exists between Patients Lucas and French or if, perhaps, the observed interaction was but a repeated act of Lucas's performed among multiple subjects."

Just as the doctor was finishing his last words, a bit of movement to his left captured his attention. He glanced over to see none other than Patient Swan slinking quietly toward the makeshift throne where Patient Mills sat silent and still and seemingly oblivious to everything around her. Her brown eyes were nearly hollow as they maintained their focus upon Dr. Hopper, though she seemed to actually be seeing nothing, having perhaps fallen into a trance as she stared.

A shiver shot down Hopper's spine at the mere sight of Patient Swan, images from his dream filtering into his brain as he took in her wild golden hair and her rippling biceps. Unbidden, he imagined her with a sword as his mind vibrated with echoes of "The Savior." He swallowed thickly, shaking his

head just slightly as he fought to clear away the images and remain within the moment, focused.

Once focused, Dr. Hopper watched as Patient Swan crept steadily toward the makeshift throne, her hands going up to push at her sleeves as if reassuring herself that her arms were still exposed. She cracked her neck to both sides before quietly clearing her throat and saying, "Um...Regina?"

Patient Mills quickly shook her head as the blonde's voice pulled her from her trance and brought her back to reality. She turned and looked down at the blonde, a small smile almost instantly gracing her lips. She said nothing though as she simply stared at the other woman, almost as if she was quietly appreciating her company and nothing else.

"Is it okay if I call you Regina?" Patient Swan then asked timidly as her hands twisted nervously in the bottom of her shirt. Hopper was rather intrigued by this, considering that in every instance in which he had observed the blonde, she seemed headstrong and confident, even, to an extent, with Patient Blanchard who had obviously assumed the role of a mother figure to the blonde. It seemed, though, that when in the presence of Patient Mills, Patient Swan was almost shy and obviously a bit nervous. The most intriguing thing about *that*, Dr. Hopper noted, though, was that Patient Mills seemed much the same in the present of the blonde.

Patient Mills leaned down so that she was a bit closer to the blonde standing just beside her throne and quietly, almost sweetly, said, "You, and only you, may call me Regina."

A brilliant smile lit the blonde woman's face then and she quickly rushed to say, "Well, *Regina*, I just wanted to tell you that I think you look really beautiful today, even though, you know, we're all pretty much wearing the same outfit."

The brunette chuckled softly and beautifully at that before she uncharacteristically moved a hand forward and brushed the backs of her fingers down Patient Swan's cheek. "Why are you so sweet to me?"

"Because you deserve it," the blonde said, shrugging her shoulders as if it was the most obvious answer in the world, "and because I know what it feels like."

Dr. Hopper watched as Patient Mills' features seemed to soften even further in that moment and he heard her breath audibly hitch in her throat before she quietly asked, "You know what *what* feels like?"

"To not be loved by anyone," Patient Swan whispered sadly as she leaned into the brunette's touch.

Dr. Hopper scribbled on his memo pad feverishly, thoroughly surprised by the intimate, shockingly sane, and even tender moment that was occurring between the two women, two women who such actions seemed strangely out of character for. It seemed the two were drawn to each other somehow, and Dr. Hopper intended to determine the roots of the connection. He motioned to an orderly by waving his arm and letting out a low whistle. When the orderly looked over, the doctor pointed to Patient Swan and nodded his head, signaling that he wished for the orderlies to collect her and take her down to the room designated as his office.

It was time for individual sessions to begin.

Chapter 6: Also A Swan

A/N: Hey everyone. Thank you so much for your great reviews and continued support of this story. I appreciate it so much and look forward to your thoughts every chapter.

This chapter is fairly short (the next segment is going to be too long to tack onto this one) and doesn't actually have a soundtrack. Sorry. But the next one regains much more of the creep factor, so it will have a soundtrack for sure. I hope you all enjoy it. XO-Chrmypoet

Chapter Six: Also a Swan

Dr. Hopper tapped his pen steadily against the hard wood of the small desk in the office that had been provided him by the facility. He watched in silence as Patient Swan sat across from him in a metal chair, her ankles and wrists cuffed to the arms and legs of the chair, and ignored his questions while yanking continuously at the binding cuffs. He did, however, notice that her emerald eyes did frequently and almost nervously dart to him several times throughout her struggle. It was required that any patients brought to the doctor's office be cuffed or chained in place given that the office was located on the first floor of the facility, and all opportunities of escape or physical harm were to be avoided at all costs.

The blonde tugged her wrists and kicked her ankles against the cuffs over and over and over until the doctor feared she might cause herself true harm. The cuffs, after all, were not padded. They could do serious damage with the right amount of force, slicing through the flesh and leading to quite possibly a fatal amount of blood loss. However, no matter how many times Dr. Hopper had attempted to begin a conversation with the woman, he was ever ignored and Patient Swan continued about her futile attempts at escape.

Dr. Hopper quickly jotted down a few lines in regards to the behavior, noting that the patient was particularly intolerant of binding, most likely due to her time spent in prison though there could be other underlying causes and motivations. He flicked through her pre-existing file compiled throughout the

two years of the blonde's residence at Storybrooke Asylum, only to be reminded that it contained very little information. It seemed that no previous psychiatrists had been able to crack open the mysterious shell that was Emma Swan and reveal what lie within. The file was entirely composed of mere assumptions, theories, and observations, none of which were terribly thorough and there was not a single recorded tape of an audio session with the blonde. It seemed she had been entirely unwilling to speak with previous doctors, and based on the first ten minutes of Dr. Hopper's session with her *this* day, he feared she may afford him the same silent treatment. He was nothing, though, if not determined, and on top of that, he was damned good at his job.

As he listened to the cuffs rattle and clank about, the jarring sounds pairing harshly with the grunts and whines of the woman causing them, the doctor flipped through the pages of his memo pad and read through the few notes he, himself, had written on the subject of Patient Swan. It was then that realization sank in, and suddenly, a light bulb flickered into brilliant, vibrant life somewhere in the recesses of his mind. He suspected he knew *exactly* how to crack the shell.

Dr. Hopper cleared his throat as he raised his eyes to the blonde once more and watched her continue to struggle against the cuffs. He voiced the question quietly, letting it soak into the air with slow recognition and hopefully peak the patient's interest, or perhaps trigger something within the woman that would compel her to speak. His voice was hardly above a whisper as he asked, almost instantly achieving his desired effect upon Patient Swan. It was truly remarkable.

"It seems you have taken quite the liking to Regina," he said softly, "and she to you."

The rattling and clanking of the cuffs died quickly as the blonde's head slowly lifted and emerald eyes blazed into Hopper's. Patient Swan stared at him for several long moments, her brow furrowing, before she said, "You're not allowed to call her Regina."

Positively thrilled at having broken the vocal barrier, Dr. Hopper quickly yet subtly clicked the record button on his digital device and dove back into the

conversation while keeping his pen at the ready. "Oh?" he asked, feigning surprise. "And why not?"

"Because only *I* am," the blonde answered instantly, her tone possessive and raw as her biceps rippled against the subtle strain she maintained. "You're just another one, and you don't even know her. You don't know any of us."

"Another one?" the doctor reiterated, intrigued by this remark, though he assumed she was referring to psychiatrists; he was simply another psychiatrist amongst a long list of others to have come before, especially in the case of one Regina Mills.

"Yeah, another one," she snapped with no apparent intention of clarifying her meaning, so Hopper quickly moved on, cautious of letting the conversation fizzle to a close.

"Very well," he said. "I will refer to her as Miss Mills. May I refer to *you* as Emma or do you prefer Miss Swan?"

"You will call me Savior," the blonde told him, her tone cold and her gaze icy.

The doctor took it in stride, simply nodding in answer as he jotted down a few notes. "Well then, Savior, may I ask what your connection to Miss Mills is?"

"Nope," she answered, clipping the word off sharply at the end.

"What about your relationship with Miss Blanchard?"

"Nope."

"Hmm, very well. Are you familiar with any of the other residents here?" he asked her gently. At this point, he was merely attempting to break down her outermost walls. As he well knew, it often only required one specific question. Almost every patient had a particular button question or topic that would elicit a strong reaction or launch a conversation that would allow a

level of trust or intrigue to grow. It was simply a matter of discovering what that topic or question was.

"Yup," she clipped again.

"What other residents are you familiar with?"

"All of them," the blonde answered, to which the doctor could only raise a brow and jot down quickly on his memo pad.

"All of them?" he reiterated. "You are familiar with every other resident here?"

"I've met them all," Swan told him, "except the beauty."

"The beauty?" Dr. Hopper reiterated. "Are you referring to Miss French?"

"Mmm," the blonde hummed, nodding her head as her gaze darted around the room and her wrists unconsciously tugged at her cuffs.

"Why do you refer to her as 'the beauty'?" the doctor asked, intrigued by this as this was the second patient he had heard refer to Belle French as 'the beauty' rather than by her name.

"It's what she is," Patient Swan huffed exaggeratedly as if the answer should have been obvious.

"Beautiful?" Dr. Hopper asked.

"No," the woman answered, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "She *is* 'THE BEAUTY'." She used her fingers to make dramatic air quotes as she spoke the title, though she could only lift her hands just slightly given her restraints, and rolled her eyes at the doctor once more. "That's why she lives in the fortress and knows all the poetry. Duh."

Dr. Hopper was completely thrown by that statement, unable to make heads or tails of it. He could tell, though, by the tone of the patient's voice that she was growing rather irritated with the subject, and so he chose not to press it. He moved instead to a different topic and hoped that he could keep the

woman talking for at least another thirty minutes before she closed down again, shut him out, or her minor interest fizzled entirely away.

"May I ask why it is that you call yourself 'The Savior'?" he asked, sure to keep his tone neutral so that the patient would not interpret him to be mocking her and grow offensive or unruly in response.

Patient Swan dramatically rolled her eyes and huffed out an annoyed breath before the question had even fully exited the doctor's lips. "I don't *call* myself 'The Savior,'" she snapped mockingly. "I AM the Savior."

"I see, and what are you the Savior of?" Hopper inquired.

The blonde shrugged her shoulders as she rattled against her cuffs and fixed her gaze on the floor. "The fragments," she whispered after a long while of silence.

Dr. Hopper quickly jotted the answer down, his excitement growing as he believed himself on the brink of a breakthrough with the blonde.

"Fragments?" he questioned, hoping to press her further.

"Yeah, you know, the fairy tales," she then said, to which the doctor could only furrow his brow.

"Which fairy tales?" he asked, but Patient Swan only shook her head and laughed.

"Man, you're pretty slow for a 'doctor'," she said, making the air quotes with her fingers again. "Thought you guys were supposed to know everything."

"Hmm," Dr. Hopper hummed. "Perhaps you could help me to learn."

"Why?" Patient Swan asked with disdain, before practically spitting out her next words. "Nobody helped *me* learn."

The doctor made a note of the patient's bitterness most likely in relation to her time spent in the system, especially if she was cycled throughout multiple homes. "Ah yes, you spent some time in the foster system," he said gently, watching for her reaction.

The blonde curled her lip in disgust before she growled out, "You mean the *fucker* system? Yeah, I spent some time in the *fucker* system. What of it?"

"You believe you were not properly cared for?"

"You believe you were not properly cared for?" Patient Swan mocked rudely in an almost snarl. "Seriously, dude, shut up."

Dr. Hopper didn't quite know what to make of this woman. She seemed to be a constant game of two steps forward, one step back. She would follow him in conversation only to suddenly turn on a dime and move in a different direction or simply shut the entire conversation down. Hopper was entirely incorrect in assuming that her willingness to answer a question was an opening to her psyche or a crack in her fortress walls, because the truth, it seemed, was that her defenses were always in place.

He sighed as he scribbled a few more notes on his memo pad, making points of the patient's defensive nature in both body language as well as speech, before he said, "I would really like to speak with you about your relationship with Miss Mills. You mentioned before that you wished not to speak of it; however, I think it is quite important. Do you find you can relate to Miss Mills?"

"I find I could relate WITH Miss Mills," the blonde answered before she snickered delightedly. "See what I did there?"

The doctor chuckled softly to appease her and said, "Yes, very clever."

"Listen, man, Regina is complex," the patient went on, which thrilled Dr. Hopper because the woman had chosen to elaborate without prompting. That, he hoped, was an excellent sign of progress. "And I'm complex, so yeah, I get it. I get her."

"I see, and have you two been friends for long?"

"Nah, I just watch her and stuff. She never talked to me until like two days ago. I guess she needed time to realize that I was special," the blonde told

him, nodding along with her own words as she continued to subtly kick at the cuffs around her ankles.

"Oh? And why are you special?" Dr. Hopper asked.

"Because I'm not just a Savior," she told him. "I'm also a Swan."

"Meaning?"

"You know, you ask and you ask and I give you the answers, and you still act like I've got duct tape over my mouth or some shit and you haven't heard a word," she griped, suddenly angry again.

Doctor and patient sat in silence for several moments as Hopper allowed the woman time to work through her steam. Sure enough, after several minutes absent of interaction, the blonde looked up again and animatedly asked, "Hey, did you always know it was 'duct' tape or did you like think that it was 'duck' tape for the longest time until someone told you it was 'duct' and not 'duck'?"

It was then that Hopper realized he would gain no further insight into the blonde's psyche for she had resurfaced to her hard shell, cloaking herself in silence or nonsense, and neither would aid the doctor in treating her. He called for the orderlies to collect Patient Swan, bidding her a quick farewell as the orderlies made quick work of unlocking her cuffs. Just as they were pushing her through the doorway, though, she shouted over her shoulder to the doctor.

"I still think it should be 'DUCK' tape!"

Hopper could only shake his head and request that one of the orderlies bring him his next patient. Perhaps she would somewhat less cryptic.

Not long after the orderlies had gone, the shrill ring of a phone split the air of the office, nearly causing Hopper to topple over as he jumped in response. He reached for the phone on the corner of his desk and pressed it to his ear.

"This is Dr. Hopper."

"Yeah, uh, listen doc, she said she ain't talkin' to nobody unless she gets a tea party," an orderly's voice said through the line. "We could force her down there, but she prolly won't give you nothin'. And I don't like to push her, doc. She bites."

Dr. Hopper sighed as he thought of how he could arrange a small tea party in his office. It was true that he could force the patient, but that would do no good, seeing as how cooperation is the key to communication. Even if he forced her to sit in the chair before him, she most likely would choose not to speak, and thus, it would be a waste of time.

"Uh, doc?" the orderly's voice bled into his ear once more. "You still there?"

"Yes, yes, very well," the doctor answered, clearing his throat. "I will have to postpone her session until tomorrow, but Miss Blanchard will surely have her tea party."

"Okay, doc, whatever you say."

Once the phone was quietly cradled, Dr. Hopper pulled off his glasses and swiped a hand down his face and through his sparse hair. These patients were certainly proving to be some of the most unique he had ever encountered, not to mention rather difficult. He would do whatever it took within reason, though, because Dr. Hopper abhorred failure.

So, it looked like he would be attending a tea party, and hopefully it would be ripe with conversation.

Chapter 7: Where Are The Cookies?

A/N: Thank you so much for all of the great reviews, everyone. You all have been so wonderful about this story thus far, and I greatly appreciate it!

I wrote this chapter to the theme song from the movie *Coraline*. It is a very upbeat yet creepy childish song, and it suits the chapter quite well. Give it a try. Enjoy! XO-Chrmddpoet

Chapter Seven: Where Are The Cookies?

The small round table wobbled as he set four yellow placemats atop it, followed by a small child's plastic tea set. There were four pink plastic saucers with matching pink tea cups, a small purple pitcher, a tiny purple bowl, and a yellow creamer cup. Hopper set up four mismatched plastic chairs around the small table, and in two of the chairs, he placed large stuffed animals that he had dug up from a chest in the recreation hall. The stuffed dog and bear were matted and stunk, but they were the best he had to work with. He did go the extra mile with the tea, though, having filled the pitcher with the actual beverage, the creamer cup with real creamer, and the small bowl was packed with sugar cubes. He hoped as much would cause such elation in his patient that she would be compelled to trust; or at least, to speak.

When the doctor heard the distant clinking of chains paired with the tapping and shuffling of feet, he quickly settled himself into one of the two remaining empty chairs at the small table. His knees rubbed uncomfortably against the table and he feared that the plastic chair he was seated upon might simply crumble or collapse at any minute, but he remained in place, hopeful that if he stayed as still as possible, all would go well. He grabbed quickly for his digital recorder and placed it on the table, already recording, and then readied his memo pad and pen just to his right so that he could jot down notes throughout the session.

When a loud rapping sounded on the door of his office, the doctor cleared his throat and called, "Come in."

The door creaked inward from its frame and revealed two young orderlies and a petite Mary Margaret Blanchard. Her childlike face appeared skeptical beneath the side swoop of her pixie-cut raven hair, but then as she was shuffled into the room with chained cuffs around her ankles and wrists, her bright gaze shot straight to the tea set and her entire expression changed. A high-pitched, positively girlish squeal wrenched through the air of Hopper's office as Patient Blanchard bounced on the balls of her feet, the chains on her cuffs rattling loudly.

"A tea party!" She practically sang as she thrust her hands toward one of the orderlies and shook them, desperate for the man to rid her of the cuffs binding her wrists so that she could participate in the party.

"Indeed," Dr. Hopper said as he nodded and smiled at the woman. "I believe that that was what you requested, was it not?"

"Well yes," Patient Blanchard said as she continued to shake her wrists at the orderly while never taking her eyes off of the tea set, "but my requests are usually always denied."

"Uh doc," the orderly cut in, sick of having chains and fists shaken in his face, "we're not supposed to unbind their hands." He looked from the doctor to the patient and back again, quirking an eyebrow as if to ask what the man wanted him to do.

"It will be fine just this once," Dr. Hopper told the man with a nod of consent, "because we are simply going to have a nice, friendly tea party, aren't we, Miss Blanchard?"

"YES!" She squealed instantaneously, bouncing on the balls of her feet once more.

"Well, alright," the orderly agreed, "but we'll be posted just outside the door as usual and you just yell if she tries anything. We'll put her in isolation for a week." The orderly then turned to Patient Blanchard, raised his voice a bit to

catch her attention, and asked, "You hear that, Mary? You best behave yourself or you're goin' in the hole."

"I will be so good," the petite woman answered, nodding her head enthusiastically. "I will be the best ever!"

The orderly chuckled a bit and patted her on the shoulder as he said, "Alright, calm down. Let me just get these cuffs off and you can have your little party." She squealed again as she unlocked the cuffs and pulled them off of her wrists before helping her drop into the only remaining plastic chair that wasn't occupied by a psychiatrist or stuffed animal. He then nodded to the doctor before he and the other orderly made their way into the hall to post outside the office door.

As soon as the orderlies left the room, Patient Blanchard grinned widely at the doctor, lowered her voice to a whisper, and said, "You know, I would've talked to you even without the tea party. I just figured...hey, it never hurts to try, right?"

Dr. Hopper pursed his lips at having learned that he had gone to such unnecessary effort; however, he could not help but to find the woman endearing. He smiled softly at her and said, "Well, I hoped we could be friends."

"Oh yes," the raven-haired woman said enthusiastically. "Yes, of course we can be friends. One can never have too many friends, you know?"

"I agree," Hopper said with a respectful nod. "Now, would you like for me to refer to you as Miss Blanchard, or do you prefer I call you by another name?"

"Well, my name is Mary," she answered him with a smile. "Okay, well it's not *just* Mary. It's Mary Margaret, which I like better than just Mary, but I still don't like it very much. Emma calls me MM, so maybe you could call me that. You could call me Mary or you could call me Mary Margaret or you could call me MM or you could call me Snow."

"Snow?" Dr. Hopper reiterated, surprised and confused by the last option given.

"Oh yes, like Snow White," the woman responded. "I was once woken by a kiss, so sometimes, my friends call me Snow, like the fairytale princess."

"I see, and which friends are you speaking of; friends who are also residents here?"

"Yes, there's Emma, of course, and she calls me MM or Mother or Mom or Snow," Patient Blanchard told him, "and then there is Ruby, and she only calls me Snow."

"Interesting," Dr. Hopper said as he jotted this information down on his notes. "Pardon my manners, Mary Margaret. Would you like some tea?"

That same high-pitched whine escaped her as Mary Margaret nodded frantically and clapped her hands together. As soon as the doctor began to pour tea into her tiny plastic cup, though, she gasped loudly and excitedly exclaimed, "Oh my goodness! It's real tea! I'm so excited I could just die!"

Hopper chuckled lightly as they went through the motions of sugar and creamer and then before he could dive into a round of questioning, Patient Blanchard sipped her tea and asked a question of her own. "What can I call *you*?"

He simply smiled and told her, "You may call me doctor, or Dr. Hopper is fine as well."

"Boring," she said with a fake yawn. "What is your real name?"

"That *is* my real name," he answered with another chuckle. "However, if you are referring to my first name, as I believe you are, then it is Archie."

"Archie," she pronounced slowly. "That'll do."

"Glad to hear it," he laughed. He then cleared his throat to begin his questioning once more, but was quickly cut off again by his patient.

"Archie, where are the cookies?"

"Oh, uh, I apologize. I seem to have forgotten the cookies."

"Oh, okay. Well, I'll still be your friend, just maybe not as much of a friend as I would have been if there were cookies at this tea party."

"I suppose that is understandable," the doctor replied.

"Who are your little friends here?" Patient Blanchard asked, motioning to the stuffed bear and dog. She then smiled and waved politely at each one of the stuffed animals as if they were real before her smile turned quickly to a frown and she asked, "Why haven't you served them some tea as well?"

Dr. Hopper quickly made to pour a bit of tea into each of the stuffed animals' cups as he said, "Oh, uh, well I thought that these two would be nice company. You don't mind, do you?"

She smiled brightly at him again and shook her head. "Oh no, not at all, Archie. I am quite open to friends of all kinds. You know, interspecies tea parties are all the rage these days."

Dr. Hopper had to force himself not to laugh at that as he nodded and nicely asked, "Oh, are they now?"

"No, of course not," Patient Blanchard answered with a mocking laugh. "I was just trying to make you feel better about the fact that your only friends are stuffed animals."

Hopper was certainly taken aback by that, not to mention a bit embarrassed, but he quickly recovered. He jotted down a few notes about the patient's strange suspension between reality and non-reality, between sanity and insanity. It seemed, in some ways, she was quite regressed and in others, she was rather mature, and the doctor could not help but to find her positively fascinating.

"Soooooooo, what did you want to talk to me about?" the raven-haired woman asked as she sipped at her tea and eyed the doctor.

He cleared his throat and said, "Right, yes. Well, why don't we start with you telling me a bit about yourself, Mary Margaret?"

"Hmm, that is a difficult one, Archie," she said as she brought a hand up to tap at her chin. "I am a complex person."

"I gathered as much, yes," Hopper agreed, but said nothing more and hoped that the woman would continue without prompting. Luckily, she did; however, the doctor quickly began to discover that he was not quite prepared for all that Patient Blanchard had to say.

"Oh, let's don't make assumptions, Archie," she said as she narrowed her eyes at the man. "You haven't gathered much of anything about me, or about anyone else for that matter."

The doctor's head snapped up from where his eyes had been focused on his memo pad, and he locked gazes with the woman, completely caught off guard by her sudden and complete change in demeanor and communication style. Where she had previously been quite childish, she now had an almost chilling poise about her; one could even say an air of regality. Her posture was rigid, her chin held high, and her eyes were so cold and calculating in that moment that Dr. Hopper suddenly felt incredibly uncomfortable.

"You're not the first, you know," she went on, and the more she spoke, the more uncomfortable Dr. Hopper became. The hairs on his arms and at the back of his neck began to rise as his skin prickled uncomfortably and his eyes darted to the door of his office where he could just make out the shadowed form of an orderly on the other side. "Many have tried, and many have failed, and many, many years have passed."

"Many years have passed since what?" Dr. Hopper asked quietly, cautiously, his pen trembling just a bit in his hand as he kept it pressed to his memo pad.

Patient Blanchard took a dainty sip of her tea before she quietly answered, "The killing."

Doctor and patient stared at one another for a long time in silence, both seemingly waiting for the other to speak; Hopper, however, found his throat too tight to allow his voice passage. Mary Margaret Blanchard, though, had absolutely no issues with her own voice. She clucked her tongue loudly as

she took yet another sip of tea and calmly asked, "Do I make you uncomfortable, Archie?"

"N-no, not at all," Dr. Hopper quickly added, internally damning himself for the slight stutter that so easily betrayed his lie.

"Would you like to know about the killing? Of course you would. All the new ones always want to know about it, but you know, we aren't supposed to talk about it."

"To which killing are you referring?" he asked in response, clearing his throat so as to avoid another slip-up.

"I believe you know," she whispered.

"What do you mean by 'we'?" he inquired.

"*We*," she stressed, "as in more than simply me."

The petite woman smirked at him then and offered a small wink, but the doctor missed both, for his eyes were glued to Blanchard's unbound hands. When his gaze did dart back to her face, his flesh tingled sickly. He had conducted many interviews with the criminally insane, and he had certainly been moved to chills a time or two, but there was something about the way the woman before him was looking at him in that moment. It was a gaze that felt both familiar and foreign, both perfectly natural and perfectly out of place, and it positively made his skin crawl.

Dr. Hopper's gaze slid over to the door once more, his brain urging him to call for one of the orderlies to come and bind the patient's hands just to be on the safe side. Just as he was about to give in to his gut feeling and call for an orderly, though, a flash of movement caught his eye. His attention quickly snapped back to the petite woman across from him just in time to see her head shaking furiously as if she was in pain, and then suddenly, she was slumping in her chair again, a huge smile on her face and her eyes wide with gleeful innocence, and her hands were clutching tightly to her teacup.

"Mary Margaret?" he asked cautiously.

The raven-haired woman grinned brightly at him and asked, "Yes, Archie?"

"Are you quite alright?"

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "Could I have some more tea though, please?"

Dr. Hopper hesitated for only a moment, before he quickly jumped to action, stammering out, "Y-yes, of course. My apologies." He refilled Patient Blanchard's cup before his hand shot to his pen and began to feverishly record what had just taken place. It seemed he had witnessed a complete change in person, one which extended beyond simple delusion. An alternate personality, perhaps? While no claim or mention of dissociative identity disorder existed in the patient's record, such a theory could certainly not be entirely ruled out, especially given what the doctor had just seen. Hopper scribbled the theory down and then immediately jumped into another line of questioning, hoping he could wheedle a bit more out of the woman before evening recreation.

"Mary Margaret, may I ask about your relationship with another of the residents here?"

"Sure!" she answered enthusiastically. "I only have two friends here, though."

"I was wondering about Miss Swan, in particular."

"Miss Swan?"

"Indeed."

"Are you talking about Emma?"

"Yes I am. What is your rel--"

"Aw, my little Em," the woman cooed, effectively cutting Hopper off. "She is so precious."

"So, I take it you and she are rather close?" the doctor asked, though he was quite aware of the answer already.

"Oh, the closest," Patient Blanchard answered. "It took her so long to find me, you know, but she finally did. My Charming, though. He hasn't found us yet, but he will."

"I see," Hopper hummed. "So, you consider Emma to be somewhat like family, then?"

"Oh yes, she is certainly family," the woman told him, "except when she is obsessing over the queen. Then we are not very close, and she is more like a stranger. She's my little princess at all other times, but not at those times. At those times, I just have to say, 'Emma, she's evil,' and walk away. Does she listen, though? Nope. Not at all."

"The queen?" Archie asked. "Are you referring to Miss Mills?"

"No, I don't know who that is."

"Oh, well then to whom are you referring?"

"The queen, of course. The Evil Queen."

Hopper furrowed his brows for a moment before he simply accepted the answer, knowing perfectly well that the woman was, in fact, referring to Regina Mills, even if Patient Blanchard was unaware. "Ah yes, I have heard of her."

"Well duh," the petite woman said as she sipped at her tea and nodded feverishly. She then suddenly lowered her voice to a breathy whisper as she said, "She's evil, you know. She even openly admitted it."

"She did?" Hopper asked, simply attempting to keep the woman talking while he glanced down and scribbled new notes on his memo pad.

"Oh yes, and I mean, I guess the fact that she admitted it makes her kind of, sort of, maybe, slightly a little less evil, because you know, the first step is admitting, right? But still...it's like I tell little Em; when someone tells you they're evil, you should believe that they're evil, because if they're telling you they're evil, then it pretty much means that they're evil."

"And you don't think that she might simply be misunderstood?" the doctor inquired, reiterating the question he had heard Patient Swan, herself, ask of the raven-haired woman on his first day full day at the asylum.

"Oh no, no," Patient Blanchard answered quickly, shaking her head back and forth. "I have excellent hearing, Archie, and I quite plainly heard her say, 'I am *evil*.' I mean, how can you misunderstand that?"

The doctor, again, had to swallow down his urge to laugh at the fact that while ranting about not misunderstanding, Patient Blanchard had effectively proved that she had misunderstood his actual question. Instead, he simply smiled at her, nodded, and said, "Oh, I see. And what is your relationship with the Evil Queen?"

"She doesn't like me at all," she answered almost instantly, shaking her head dramatically. "And don't ask me why, because I don't know. I've been living here for a while now, but I don't think she even knew who I was until two years ago when Emma moved here, too, which is just so weird, because how can you not know someone who is living in your palace? So weird."

The petite woman stopped to catch her breath and take a long sip of tea, before she jumped right back into her speedy ramble. "So anyway, after Emma moved here, it was like the queen suddenly was aware of me, and she didn't like me at all. She still doesn't. She calls me an idiot, and sometimes she even calls me Mary Fuck-Face Margaret--"

Patient Blanchard slapped a hand over her mouth so fast and so hard that the whipping sound of flesh on flesh echoed through the room and made the doctor cringe. He was positive that that had to have hurt. The woman seemed entirely unfazed by the self-inflicted slap, though, as she sat there with her hand cupped over her mouth and her eyes wide with terror.

After a few minutes, she finally lowered her hand and whispered, "I can't believe I said that word."

Dr. Hopper chuckled lightly before he told her, "It is quite alright. No one has to know."

Patient Blanchard hung her head in shame as she said, "But *I* will know."

"Well, we all make mistakes," the doctor said. "We simply have to accept that we made a mistake and learn to move past it. Can you do that?"

Strangely enough, not even a full ten seconds passed before the woman's head popped up. She was wearing her signature childish grin as she chirped, "Okay! So anyway, the queen hates me, and I don't know why. Maybe she thinks I have cooties. Trust me, Archie, I don't have cooties, and I would tell you if I did, because they're contagious. I wouldn't dare bring cooties to a tea party as fine as this one, even though there are no cookies. That would just be terribly rude."

"I appreciate that, Mary Margaret. Thank you," Hopper said as he scribbled down a few more notes before glancing to the clock. It was ten minutes until six, and evening recreation and dinner began at precisely six o'clock each night; thus the doctor sighed heavily and announced, "Sadly, it appears that tea time is over."

"Aw shucks," Patient Blanchard said with a frown and a snap of her fingers. "Could we have another tea party soon?"

"Perhaps," the doctor agreed.

"Oooh, could we invite my little Emma?"

"Perhaps," he answered again.

"Oh! And could we have cookies next time, too?!"

"Perhaps."

"Could you say anything other than perhaps?"

Hopper chuckled at that and whistled for the orderlies. The door opened immediately and one of the orderlies made quick work of cuffing Patient Blanchard's hands once more before guiding her toward the door. Dr. Hopper waved to her and said, "Thank you for the company, Mary Margaret. I will see you again soon."

"Don't forget the cookies, Archie!" she hollered as the orderlies shuffled her down the hall.

As soon as the clanking and rattling sounds of her chains dissipated, Dr. Hopper quickly gathered up his recorder, memo pad, and pen and stuffed them each into his briefcase. He hustled out of his office and headed for the elevator, intent on spending the next hour in Ward Four. It would be his first observation of evening recreation, and he was rather looking forward to it as he had been told by a few of the orderlies that the patients were much livelier during their evening rec than during all others.

Given the drama and theatrics he had witnessed already during morning recreations, Dr. Hopper was both thrilled as well as apprehensive about such a statement, because he knew that it meant he would be in for quite the show.

Chapter 8: The Music of Madness

A/N: Hello friends. I hope everyone had a lovely weekend and/or holiday for those who celebrate Thanksgiving.

I wrote this chapter to the theme song from the movie *Puppet Master*. Try it out as a soundtrack and imagine that it is the music that Dr. Hopper hears in the rec hall.

There is quite a bit of SwanQueen interaction in this chapter, and in the next few chapters, there will be individual sessions with Regina, Ruby, and Belle. I hope you all enjoy, and please, let me know what you think!

**Thank you to everyone who continues to read and review. XO-
Chrmdpoet**

Chapter Eight: The Music of Madness

As Dr. Hopper made his way through the desolate corridors of Ward Four, the hair on the back of his neck prickled. He could not explain the uneasy feeling creeping along his flesh until he heard the unmistakable tapping of soft footsteps somewhere far behind him. The doctor whirled quickly on the spot, heart pounding in his chest, only to find the corridor deserted but for himself.

"Damn old building," Hopper cursed quietly as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow.

With one last glance around the corridor, he quickly turned on his heel and continued on toward the recreation hall. When he entered the hall, though, his unease only increased. His skin tingled once more, chills creeping down his spine, as his eyes locked onto a familiar sandy-haired man in a patient robe, a battered old top hat, and holding a large, somewhat moth-eaten and most likely out-of-tune piano accordion.

Jefferson was standing just inside the doors to the rec hall, almost as if he had suddenly appeared out of thin air the moment the doctor entered the room. A slow smile spread across the young man's face as he stared at Hopper through curious, cold eyes. They watched each other for several long moments before the doctor made to move, and that was when the patient's fingers twitched over stained keys, and the music began.

It sounded almost as carnival music, a circus-like rhythm and tone to it that made Hopper's stomach churn easily. Bile danced up his throat, forcing the doctor to swallow thickly just to keep it down. The music reminded him far too well of a serial killer he had once profiled for the FBI, an elder man named Harris Wheeler, or as the media coined him--"Hobo the Homicidal Clown."

It had taken nearly seven years to capture the man, and in those seven years, he managed to kill forty-three people, mostly middle-aged women, the majority of whom were housewives and all of whom had children under the age of ten. Each woman died due to asphyxiation, having had an oversized jawbreaker candy stuffed down their throats. Wheeler would then put each woman on display somewhere, postmortem, most commonly in each woman's own house while the rest of the family was absent from the home. He would set them up on couches or at kitchen tables, paint their faces as sad clowns with tears and drooping stars, and then leave them for the families to find.

Wheeler's own face was painted as well, though once he was captured, it was quickly discovered that his own face paint was not paint at all. The man had actually had his face tattooed that way. It was rather disconcerting to be in the same room with the man because of this, but what made being in his company even more chilling was the fact that during an entire session with Hopper before the trial, Wheeler delightedly hummed circus and carnival theme music over and over with an almost child-like innocence. It had been a truly disturbing experience for the doctor.

Dr. Hopper tucked his chin to his chest and pushed forward through the rec hall, doing his best to ignore the sandy-haired man dancing slowly around him while playing carnival music on a tired piano accordion. He was unable to do so for long, though, as the further he proceeded into the hall, the more he began to notice the other patients. They, unlike Hopper, seemed quite

delighted by Jefferson's haunting melody, for everywhere the doctor looked, patients were dancing along to the carnival tune, almost as if they were hypnotized by it.

Dr. Hopper proceeded to the back of the rec hall and settled into his usual spot in the back corner. He pulled his recorder and memo pad from his briefcase and began his observations, hoping to gain quite a new bit of insight about several of his patients that evening. Primarily, though, he intended to focus on the two patients he believed would prove to be rather difficult to treat--Regina Mills and Emma Swan. He also believed that the connection between the two women might somehow lend to his treatment of Mary Margaret Blanchard.

Though the patients were doing little more than dancing (albeit some of them rather wildly despite the slower rhythm of the music), Dr. Hopper could definitely see and understand what the orderlies had been referring to when they had mentioned evening recreation. There was a buzz in the atmosphere, it seemed--an elevated liveliness that morning recs greatly seemed to lack. The air was thinner, hotter, and the patients were louder. Their laughter, yelps, grunts, speech, and singing melded with Jefferson's melody and became a swarming cloud of noise that devoured the hall.

The combined sounds, in fact, were so overwhelming that it took little time for a dull and throbbing ache to form in the doctor's head. He sighed heavily as he stared around the room, hoping to spot Patients Swan and Mills since the latter's makeshift throne was oddly vacant that evening. It was not long before he caught a flash of blonde, and his eyes zeroed in on the tangled locks and exposed biceps of Emma Swan as the woman made her way quickly through the hall.

Hopper followed Swan with his eyes, watching as the blonde moved with purpose, and doing so predictably led him to his other person of interest, Regina Mills. The brunette stood partially hidden from view behind a small curtain hanging from a massive boarded-up window. She was hardly noticeable and yet it seemed Patient Swan knew precisely where and how to find her.

Patient Mills' dark eyes scanned the room with purpose, though Hopper had not a clue as to what that purpose might be. Her focus was quickly scrambled and skewed, though, as the wild-haired blonde darted into her view. Hopper instantly noticed the way the woman's face changed upon seeing Patient Swan, a smile turning the corners of her lips upward and her eyes softening with what one would surely define as affection.

The doctor set his equipment aside, shoving it under his chair and pushing everything further into the corner so that it was all entirely engulfed in shadows. He needed to get closer to the two women, and he would unfortunately have to leave his possessions behind if he hoped to have even the slightest chance of not sticking out like a sore thumb. He darted across the hall and toward the two women, though he was sure to keep to the walls and out of sight.

He thankfully did not have to worry about being quiet with his movements given the noise level of the hall that evening, and thus he moved much quicker than he otherwise would have. As he came upon the two women, he picked up on their conversation midway through one of Patient Swan's sentences.

"...and that's why I came rushing over. I just had to tell you that you look really beautiful tonight."

"Thank you," Patient Mills answered, ducking her head almost shyly. Hopper could not help but notice how youthful the woman looked in that moment, rejuvenated entirely despite having spent her life confined in a weathered asylum. She was even more striking than usual.

"Yeah, no problem," the blonde responded. "But do you think I look good?"

Hopper watched as a sweet smile decorated the brunette's lips before the woman chuckled softly and beautifully. Patient Mills extended a hand and pressed her palm gently to the other woman's chest, just above the heart. "You are quite dashing, dear," she told the blonde.

Patient Swan's face exploded with joy and she inched closer to the brunette, close enough that their bodies were nearly touching. "In that case, would you

like to dance with me, Regina?"

"You want to dance with *me*?" Dr. Hopper was quite surprised to hear the sheer astonishment and vulnerability in Patient Mills' voice as she asked the timid question. It seemed the woman's notoriety was not quite the blessed thing. It certainly gave her a strange sense of power over others--to be feared. However, it also set her apart and kept everyone at arm's length. Sadly, people no longer saw her as a person. She was simply a killer in the minds of the public, and it had obviously eaten away at her internally for years.

Dr. Hopper made a mental note of this, reminding himself to theorize further about the development once he had his equipment at hand again. He was quickly shaken from his thoughts though as the earnest voice of Patient Swan drifted to him once more.

"I've never wanted to dance with anyone as much as I want to dance with you."

The doctor could not be entirely sure but he believed he heard a faint trembling crack in Patient Mills' voice as the woman took a deep breath and asked, "Right here?"

The blonde nodded with a gentle smile. "Right here." She then held out her hand and waited, though she didn't have to wait long. Within seconds, the other woman's fingers were slipping along hers and then suddenly their bodies were flush together and moving gently along to the rhythm of Jefferson's chilling melody.

Hopper inched just a bit closer to the dancing women, intent on hearing every word of any conversation that might spark between them. He was positively fascinated by their connection. Plus, his gut instinct was telling him that said connection was the key to dismantling both women's iron walls and discovering what lay beneath.

"So, I heard one of the prison guards say that we're all crazy," Patient Swan said as she rested her head against the brunette's. Hopper noted that the woman seemed to believe she was still in some sort of prison; then again,

she was correct in a sense. "I'm not crazy. I mean, I don't *feel* crazy. I don't think we're crazy. Do you?"

The doctor was not terribly surprised by this. He had learned throughout his schooling and throughout his years of work that one of the most profound and common signifiers of those suffering from mental illness or delusion, was a general absence of awareness about said illness or delusion. They were unaware of their own afflictions.

Hopper believed it to be a truth rooted in the very nature of mental illness, but especially in delusion. For those without mental illness or delusion, what society foolishly labels as "normal", *reality* is the clear window through which the world is seen. The window, however, is far from indestructible. Its glass can crack, and that is how a delusion forms--as a crack in the glass of reality, spreading and rippling until the entire window becomes a web of fissures. The window, or *reality*, is fractured, and thus those looking through it see the world in a different way.

So, you see, to the deluded mind, the entire world and all those within it become naught more than a distortion of what it and they once might have been.

They see even themselves as a fractured reflection--an image not perpetuated by the rest of the world.

Patient Mills smiled sweetly at the blonde, shook her head gently, and answered, "No, I don't believe we are crazy. I think, perhaps, we are simply misunderstood."

"But why?" Swan asked her. "Why are we misunderstood? What makes us so different, Regina?"

"I don't know, dear." The brunette dropped her head down to rest it atop the blonde's shoulder and pulled the woman even closer as they continued to dance. "I think people simply reject or fear what they do not understand, and thus they divide everything into labeled boxes. People love labels because they believe they are safe. It's how they define everything and everyone, and it is also how they are taught, how they learn to see and interact with the

world. Certain labels are acceptable. Others are not, and so on. Do you understand?"

Dr. Hopper was positively floored by what he had only just heard filter from Patient Mills' mouth. Regina Mills was so collected, so gathered and lucid, that were it not for her perpetuated charade of believing herself an evil queen, the doctor would assume the woman did not belong in an asylum at all. Then again, he had met countless mentally ill persons, even those suffering from delusions, in his time as a psychiatrist and it was not uncommon that many of them seemed quite sane--similar to what he now saw in one Regina Mills.

Mental illness was different for each and every person afflicted. Some people wore their afflictions on their sleeve, on their skin, for all the world to see and point and say, "Yes, you are crazy." Others, however, wore their balance, their sanity, as a camouflage, and they fit rather well into society. Regina Mills was one of the latter. Hopper fully believed that were she released from the asylum to live as an individual part of society once more, Patient Mills would certainly blend and blend well.

"Yeah, I think I get it," Patient Swan answered after several long moments of what seemed to be intense contemplation. "People think I'm tough and sometimes even mean just because I work out and because I don't take shit from anyone, but that's not really true. I'm a lot softer than that. I've just always had to protect myself, you know? Protect the soft parts."

Hopper watched then as Patient Mills lifted her head and the two women stared into one another's eyes as if sharing a silent conversation that even if spoken aloud, no one else would understand. And then, to the doctor's great and pleasant surprise, the brunette woman spoke quiet words just barely audible above the music and chatter of the hall--words that revealed her vulnerability; words that lived beyond the walls.

"Sometimes," Patient Mills began quietly, "I'm afraid that my own soft spots no longer exist."

"Because of your parents?" the blonde asked gently. "Because of what they did to you?"

"Maybe. I'm unsure. Are you even aware of the things my parents did to me?"

"Not really. I just know they were pretty bad."

"Indeed," Patient Mills agreed, nodding as she tucked her head back into the blonde's neck. "There were times I believed I would have been better off as an orphan."

"It's a lonely life," the blonde answered. "Trust me, it hurts just as much--only all of it is on the inside."

Patient Mills lifted her head once more and brought a hand up to cup Patient Swan's cheek. "I wish you would have had a family to love you."

"I wish you would've had one, too."

They swayed back and forth against one another as Jefferson continued to dance madly around the room, playing the same tired chilling tune over and over and over so that it bored into the doctor's brain and promised to haunt his dreams. None but Hopper seemed affected by the melody, though, as the patients seemed only to enjoy it. They danced and they sang nonsensical lyrics and they laughed and chattered and bounced about as if they hadn't any cares in the world. None more-so, though, than the blonde and brunette before him, both lost in each other's eyes and in the comfort of someone finally seeing them as more than madness.

"Regina," Patient Swan said softly as the two women's faces drew closer together.

"Emma..."

"Can I kiss you?"

"Are you sure you would like to?" Patient Mills asked insecurely. "You believe I am beautiful, Emma, but it is only because you have never seen all of me. I have so many terrible scars."

"That only makes you even *more* beautiful," the blonde told her. "So, can I kiss you? Do you want to kiss me?"

The brunette stared at the other woman for quite some time before she finally nodded and softly said, "I believe I would like that very much."

Joy blasted across Patient Swan's face and then the blonde quickly said, "Okay then, let's go."

Dr. Hopper was thrown off by that last bit, confused as to what the blonde meant. He watched as the two women darted swiftly away from him, and he cursed that he could not immediately follow without being seen by one or the other. So, he waited a few moments before stepping from his shadowed hiding spot and following where he had seen the two run off.

As the doctor stepped out into the more populated portion of the recreation hall, his awareness of the other patients suddenly snapped back into existence. The hall was in absolute chaos. Jefferson continued to dance about while playing his piano accordion and many of the other patients danced along with him. However, quite a few other patients were engaged in loud squabbles, screaming poker matches, near-violent wrestling, overwhelmingly loud rounds of song, random jumping on furniture, and the like.

He glanced to his right, toward the portion of the hall that housed the television and the many couches, and could just make out a rather disturbing sight through the mass of dancing patients--the bare, wrinkled skin of a male patient's exposed behind. The man's hips were gyrating and jolting forward with rapid abandon, and as Hopper moved just slightly forward, he quickly realized that the motion was not without purpose as the man had another male patient bent over in front of him. The two men were openly copulating without consequence in the middle of the recreation hall, their activities only partially hidden from view by the crowd of dancers.

The doctor was not terribly surprised by the act, as he had seen this happen quite often in psychiatric institutions; however, it was typically halted rather quickly by nearby orderlies. Hopper glanced around in search of the nearest orderlies, only to see that the majority of them were otherwise engaged, preoccupied by other patients--particularly a small group of patients near the front of the hall who had broken out into a complete brawl.

It was then, however, that Hopper noticed that the two orderlies that typically stood watch by the small library had apparently caught onto what was taking place between the two patients by the television lounge. They quickly made their way over to put an end to it, and that was when the doctor saw that familiar flash of blonde again. As soon as the library orderlies left their posts, Patients Swan and Mills shot into the mostly secluded area and out of sight.

Dr. Hopper crossed over to the library in pursuit of the two women and once he reached the opening, he slowed to a silent creep. He slipped through the opening and slowly peeked around the first shelf into the first row of books. It was there that he caught sight of the target patients.

Patient Swan's hands were cupped around the brunette's cheeks as she leaned forward and without hesitation pressed her lips to Patient Mills'.

Hopper watched in awe as the kiss seemed nearly reverent in its gentle nature. They kissed as if it was their first and as if it was their last.

Chapter 9: Beauty and Freedom

A/N: Hello again everyone. Sorry about the delay. I took a longer break due to the holiday and am just now getting completely caught up. I just want to address something quickly before we dive back into the story.

I've had a few people in reviews express that they would like to see the story from a different point-of-view, and one recently who spoke of Archie's POV being too clinical. On the other hand, I've had many of you express that you quite enjoy it being from the doctor's POV.

Here is what I will tell you on that front: I appreciate all of your opinions, and I certainly understand any desires to see the story from perhaps Emma's or Regina's POV, but that is not going to happen. Sorry if that disappoints anyone, but Archie's POV is integral to the story and necessary for a later plot point; so, it will remain in his POV, and when we get to the whys of everything, you will understand my choice and hopefully appreciate it. :)

Okay, so I wrote this chapter to the theme song from the movie *The Grudge*. It's definitely got a major creep factor to it, so I hope you will check it out, and enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Nine: Beauty and Freedom

Her eyes were dark and unapologetic as they gazed outwardly upon the crowd gathered around the courtroom. Archie shifted in his seat as he watched her, felt her eyes upon him. Even at only sixteen years old, her voice was sultry and melodic, seductive by its very nature and it caused tingles to erupt upon the young doctor's flesh and ripple down his spine.

"Miss Mills," the prosecutor snapped, but the young woman's eyes never strayed from the crowd, "where were you on the night in question, the evening of the 16th of June?"

"I believe you know, sir," the brunette hummed quietly, darkly. "I was *home*." She lingered on the word home, drew it out almost mockingly.

"And were you alone?"

"No," she told him, the word hardly more than breath. "My parents were home."

Her deep, chocolate eyes fell upon Archie again, locking gazes with him for only a moment. His heart began to hammer in his chest as he watched the young woman's lips just slightly stretch into a subtle smirk before leveling out once more.

"And what were your parents doing that evening?"

"Beating her as usual," the brunette answered.

"I'm sorry," the prosecutor interjected. "*Her*? To whom exactly are you referring, Miss Mills?"

"My apologies." She shook her head quickly. "I meant to say me."

Archie's eyebrow lifted of its own accord as he noted the subtle difference to the young lady's voice with those words. She suddenly sounded timid where she had previously sounded smug. Her voice quavered where it had only just held firm.

The young brunette's eyes fell on him again only moments later, and he let out a soft gasp as he realized that they were a different color--a lighter, softer brown; more of a milk chocolate than the near-obsidian they had been only a moment prior.

"So, your parents were beating you," the prosecutor reiterated. "I bet that made you angry, didn't it, Miss Mills? Made you want to return the favor?"

"Objection!"

Archie tuned out the drone of lawyers and judges and gallery observers whispering, and he focused only on the breathtakingly beautiful teen on the

stand. She locked gazes with him, and he was able to literally watch as those soft brown eyes faded once more to black, the girl's face going rigid and cold.

"You believe you can fix me," she whispered, though the words seemed thunderous in Archie's ears.

He gasped as he realized that the young woman was speaking directly to him. The doctor glanced frantically around the courtroom, only to realize that it was suddenly entirely empty but for Regina Mills and himself. He scrambled quickly to his feet, chills rippling down his spine as he watched the teenaged killer slowly rise from her seat behind the stand.

She kept her eyes locked firmly upon him as she stepped down and took slow, steady steps forward. She stalked toward him even as he moved into the center aisle and began backing himself toward the door. Fear devoured his entire body as he watched the impossible occur. The teen's face and body had somehow begun aging right before his eyes though never losing their beauty.

"You believe you can kill me," she hissed as she transformed into a grown woman, her steps growing faster, pounding harder into the courtroom floor and echoing like hard promises of pain.

"No, no," Archie stammered out as he backed away, holding his hands out in a show of surrender. "I just want to help you. I swear."

As Regina Mills made her way toward him, a fire burned in her dark eyes, and Archie gasped again as he watched her clothes begin to transform with her body. The conservative skirt suit she had been wearing seemed to melt and fade and morph into an elaborate gown seemingly fit for royalty. Her face was suddenly decorated in dark and exaggerative makeup, her hair twisted into an up-do, and a high collar framed her neck and jawline.

"Help?" she snapped at him. "What help can you offer, bug? It is I who retaliates. It is I who avenges, and it is *I* who protects."

"You were protecting yourself," Archie quickly agreed. He gulped thickly as he felt his back slam into the doors of the courtroom. He pushed and pushed but they refused to budge, and the woman was quickly closing the space between them. "Against your parents; you were protecting yourself against your parents because they beat you. I can understand that."

The skirt of her dark purple gown swished as she walked and she let out a low chuckle that made Archie's stomach churn. "I must admit, you're not like the others; however, you are a fool to think you understand. You understand *nothing*."

"No, I do!" the young doctor nearly shouted. "I do. Physical violence wears on the mind. It often leads to a breakdown or a lashing out. It's perfectly understandable, Miss Mills. Such abuse...it...it robs a child of her dignity. It mars the innocence."

Within seconds, the woman was ripping into Archie's personal space. Her face, twisted into an angry snarl, was but an inch from the doctor's, and her eyes were both fire and ice combined.

"It *mars* the beauty," she growled, and then without another word her fist shot forward through the minute space.

A bloodcurdling scream ripped up from Archie's throat and spilled into the air as fingers plunged into his flesh, desperately seeking his heart.

Dr. Hopper jolted awake, nearly tumbling from his small bed in his effort to get his hands on his chest. He practically ripped open his shirt before his fingers shot to the bare flesh of his chest, running over the smooth skin there and feeling for holes or blood or a trauma of any kind. His skin, however, was without blemish. There was no blood. There was no wound. Physically, he was perfectly fine.

The doctor rose shakily to his feet and crossed to the small pitcher of water he kept on his desk. His forehead, neck, and back were drenched in sweat and his throat was terribly dry and itching. He drank as if he knew the thirst of thousands, and when his glass was drained, he refilled it and drank again.

Hopper paced around his living quarters, shaking out his limbs in an effort to calm the residual fear of his haunting dream, but his anxiety only increased as he realized that he had not a clue as to how he came to be there--in his room.

No matter how he strained his mind to recall the events prior to his slumber, Dr. Hopper could not remember how he had ended up in his bed asleep. The last place he remembered being was the recreation hall, and the last thing he fully remembered was a forbidden kiss between two of his most trying patients. His head throbbed as he tried to paint an image upon the massive blank canvas that made up the time between that moment and the moment when he woke from the dream.

Alas, he was met with only blackness in his memory, only silence in his ears; a nothingness that felt cold and heavy in his bones.

And that dream...he simply could not fathom the meaning of the dream.

He had certainly seen the televised portions of Regina Mills' murder trial some eighteen years prior, but he had not actually attended the trial. He had been unable to, though he had certainly wanted to.

And what of the conversation held between his dream self and his dream version of Patient Mills?

None of it made any sense to his nerve-rattled brain in that moment, but then, neither did the other dreams he had suffered from since his arrival at Storybrooke Asylum and his first interactions with his newest patients.

But this...well, something about this particular dream simply felt so real.

Paired with his inability to recall ever leaving the rec hall and returning to his room, the dream completely and utterly unnerved him.

"Uh, Miss Lucas, my apologies," Dr. Hopper said as he swiped a hand down his face, riddled with the signs of his exhaustion after a mere few days at the asylum. "I meant to take session with you yesterday, but I unfortunately had to rearrange my schedule."

"It's cool, dude," Patient Lucas said as she glanced around the office, straining against her cuffs in order to twist in her seat and look around. "Just call me Ruby, though. I hate that 'Miss Lucas' shit."

"My apologies," the doctor told her again. "Well now, let's get started, shall we?"

"D'you have any gum?" Patient Lucas asked, cutting him off before he could even begin. "I really love gum, but they never let me have any because I stuck some in an orderly's hair once."

"Sorry, no. I don't typically chew the stuff myself, so I don't keep any on me."

"Bummer." The young brunette sighed dramatically before leaning her head back to rest on the top of the chair back, her chocolate hair falling in waves around it. "Oh well, just another gumless day."

Dr. Hopper chuckled lightly at that and said, "I'm afraid so. Now, are you ready to begin?"

"Yup, fire away."

"Well, let's begin with something simple, shall we? How are you feeling today, Ruby?"

"Horny."

The doctor's cheeks flamed unbidden and he quickly cleared his throat. "I, uh, I see, and is this sensation one that you experience frequently or only on occasion?"

"Oh, it's frequent," Patient Lucas told him as she rolled her head around across the top of the seat. "Pretty much all the time. Part of being a wolf, I guess. Animal instincts and all that shit."

"Mm," he hummed. "Tell me about that."

"Bout what?" she asked, propping her head up so that she could quirk an eyebrow at the doctor. "The wolf thing or the being-horny thing?"

He cleared his throat again as he jotted down several notes about the woman's blatant vocalization of her uninhibited sexual desire. "The wolf thing."

"Oh, right," she said, sighing as if disappointed. "It's intense, you know, but like a really good kind of intense. I mean, it can be kind of scary when I think I might hurt someone, but at the same time, it can be really cool. If I'm being honest, I guess I have to tell you that it's probably like my favorite thing about me."

"Oh?" Hopper asked, perfectly intrigued. "And why is that?"

"It's freedom," Patient Lucas answered simply, shrugging her shoulders to the best of her ability without yanking too much on her restraints.

"What type of freedom?"

"From shit like this." She rattled the chains of the cuffs around her wrists and ankles. "Only like for the mind, you know?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Dr. Hopper told her, watching as the young woman's eyes grew wide and hopeful, filling with spirit and affection the more she spoke of her inner wolf. "Would you mind explaining further?"

"Okay, see, it's like this: when I'm a wolf, I get to feel and think and do all the things that like *girls* can't or are taught that they shouldn't, you know? Like I can be loud and I can be different. I can be hairy, obviously!"

She stopped for a moment to laugh at her own joke, guffawing loudly while shaking her head.

"Anyway, I can be fierce and strong, and I can be horny, you know? Does that make sense? Like when a female animal fucks another animal, nobody is like 'That animal is not a proper lady. She is a slut!' Does that make sense? I can be free with my desire and with my body and with my mind. I can think what I want and feel what I want, and nobody can tell me I can't."

Dr. Hopper was positively fascinated as he scribbled down all he heard, writing quickly to match the speed with which Patient Lucas spoke. He was already beginning to make the proper parallels, which greatly helped with his assessment of the young woman.

She spoke in terms of rights and liberties of women often denied or rejected in both traditional and modern societies. Women were frequently taught to be submissive, that men were the protectors and the providers. They were not taught to defend themselves or even that anyone would believe them if they claimed to have done as much and said defense resulted in a crime. They were taught not to be sexually explicit, that it was improper to have multiple suitors or lovers. They were taught not to be fierce or strong or loud or outspoken.

It all became quite clear in Hopper's head as he scratched out his theories while the woman spoke. Patient Lucas's wolf, he believed, was a manifestation of her inner desires. It was the imaginative collection of her inhibitions and of what she believed she deserved as a person but was frequently denied by society.

"And I can protect myself, you know? I can *fucking protect* myself, and nobody thinks I'm crazy for it. Like when a female animal attacks another animal, nobody goes, 'That animal must be crazy,' or 'She needs to be put down.' They just accept that she has a right to protect herself by whatever means she's got, you know? That's what being a wolf is all about, dude. It's fucking freedom. It's freedom like a woman doesn't have in this world."

"Indeed," Hopper agreed, his mind perfectly and beautifully blown by the young patient before him.

Dr. Hopper gazed into the young woman's light brown, almost golden eyes where she sat across from him. Her wrists and ankles were free, entirely unbound as she had no history of violence and was considered perfectly safe. Her ankles were crossed neatly, one over the other, and her hands sat gingerly upon her lap.

"Hello, Miss French." He spoke softly as the woman seemed so incredibly fragile. At the same time, she was positively mesmerizing. Her body and her face held so much youth, so much poise, and so much innocence, and yet her eyes told a different story. Her eyes were ripe with age; wisdom, it seemed. "I'm Dr. Hopper, but if you like, you may call me Archie, and I will call you Belle if you agree."

Patient French simply stared at him, silent as ever, though her lips did certainly quirk into a gentle smile.

"I will take that smile as a yes," Hopper told her. "Would you mind if I asked you some questions today, Belle?"

The young woman merely tilted her head to the side as she surveyed the man, yet still, she said not a word.

"I've been informed that you prefer not to speak," he tried again. "Perhaps we could find another way, though, to communicate. How does that sound?"

The doctor rose quickly from his desk and slipped around it. He held out a small notepad and a black crayon. It was forbidden to provide any patient of Ward Four with potentially dangerous items, items that could easily transform into weaponry. Therefore, despite her being nonviolent, Dr. Hopper provided Patient French with a soft, blunt-tipped crayon rather than a pen or pencil. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind writing out your responses?"

Patient French slowly reached out and took the items, offering the doctor another gentle smile. He returned it and then stepped back around the desk to settle once more into his seat. "Now, I will ask you a few questions, and all you have to do is write your responses on the notepad. Simple enough, yes?"

Again, the brunette tilted her head curiously at the man, but said nothing, and her hands remained perfectly motionless around the objects he had provided her.

"Okay," Hopper said, undeterred. "So, Belle, how are you feeling today?"

No words. No movement.

"Sad, mad, happy, tired, hungry; come now, it can be anything," he tried again.

No words. No movement.

Patient French simply stared at him as if he were speaking another language, though she clutched tightly to the notepad and crayon as if they were gifts she was determined to keep. She wrote nothing, though.

Dr. Hopper cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. He'd known that this particular patient was going to be quite the challenge, considering no previous doctor had managed to crack her, but he was certainly no quitter. He was determined to help the young woman if he could.

"I've noticed you spend a large portion of your time in the library," he mentioned. "Do you like books?"

"..."

"Are you an avid reader?"

"..."

"What is your favorite book?"

"..."

"I was always a fan of classical literature. What about you?"

"..."

"Have you made any friends here, Belle? Miss Lucas, perhaps?"

"..."

"I hear you have a love of teacups. Is that true?"

Hopper watched as Patient French's eyes seemed to genuinely light up at the mention of teacups. Her features brightened, youth flooded those golden-

brown irises, and Dr. Hopper believed he had finally mentioned something that would afford him a breakthrough.

Unfortunately, though, Patient French simply smiled at him. Her hands remained motionless, clutched around the small notepad and crayon. And her lips? They were still as well.

She said nothing.

Hopper pulled one of the waiting orderlies aside while the other two went ahead with Patient French to escort her back to Ward Four. "I'm going to need any surveillance tapes that have captured Patient French's vocal interactions with the teacup and any other inanimate object."

"Uh, no can do, doc," the orderly told him, stuttering a bit and glancing around nervously. "I'm not personally authorized to give you that sorta thing. The orderlies don't even have access to the files and the tapes. You'll have to take it up with the director."

Dr. Hopper noticed the young man's jittery behavior, but thought nothing of it. He had never interacted with this particular orderly, but he assumed the kid was fresh to the job. Psychiatric institutions often gave people the creeps, and took some time to get used to, especially those known to be housing the *criminally* insane.

"Oh, I see. Very well. I will do that then."

The orderly nodded, his eyes darting rapidly between the doctor's eyes and the doctor's hand, which was still attached to the orderly's arm. "Uh, anything else, doc?"

"No, no nothing, thank you."

"Alright then," the young man said with what seemed like a rather forced smile. "Good night then, doctor."

"Yes, good night." Hopper released his hold on the man's arm and watched as he darted so quickly from the room that one would think someone was after him. The doctor merely shrugged it off and headed out into the corridor, chuckling at the orderly's obvious discomfort in such an environment.

He followed a path he had traveled only once before, the day of his arrival at the asylum. His eyes remained fixated upon the single door in the distance, the only door, in fact, in that entire corridor. He only hoped the office was currently occupied.

For Hopper needed those tapes, and only one man could provide them.

Chapter 10: Prelude in C-Sharp Minor

A/N: I don't typically do this, but I feel I must address a specific guest review I received, and since I cannot PM the reviewer, I must do it here. I'm not going to insert the entire review, because it would be too long, but I will insert a portion so that said reviewer knows I am addressing him/her:

"I have a feeling that you're going to be including red beauty into this story cause I remember you saying that you ship it! I storing lay dislike red beauty and I strongly suggest that you just leave swan queen as the only pairing!"

Thank you for being so invested. However, I must say I didn't care much for how you worded this. This entire review came across as a lecture to me about how I should or should not write MY story. Simply because I ship a pairing does not mean that I will include that pairing in my works. RedBeauty will NOT be a pairing in this story. That was NEVER part of my plan. In fact, I have planned for NO pairing other than SQ. So, again, thank you for being so invested. That means more than I can say, but please be considerate with your wording. Respectful requests with an incorporated "please" go a long way.

Now, on to the soundtrack. I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of "Prelude in C-Sharp Minor Op. 3 No. 2" by Rachmaninov. It is the melody discussed in this chapter. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Ten: Prelude in C-Sharp Minor

The nearer Hopper drew to the director's office, the more he began to notice the change in the atmosphere. This particular corridor of the administrative floor, typically engulfed in silence but for the faint echoes from floors above, was newly painted with vibrant sound. The haunting lilt of a classical melody, a record of fingers marching over black-and-white keys, filtered into the corridor from behind the director's door.

The melody settled uncomfortably in his ears and upon his flesh as it echoed throughout the corridor to meld with the faint tap-tapping that the doctor had become accustomed to hearing in the asylum. It was the sound of being followed, and while Hopper often found himself whirling around to catch someone in the act, he was ever disappointed to find only empty space and shadowed corners. Yet, despite having no visible evidence to validate the prickling sensation on his skin, the doctor could not bring himself to believe such sounds and sensations were but a trick of the mind, perpetuated by the atmosphere. He believed he was being followed, though by whom or for what reason, he was entirely unsure.

Dr. Hopper recognized the faint glow of what appeared to be firelight flickering visibly at the crack beneath the door's base, though he could not recall having seen a fireplace in the director's office before. Then again, he had spent little time in the room during his one and only visit there.

As he came to stand before the office door, Hopper noticed the way his heart was racing. It thudded heavily against his ribcage, though he could not fathom why. Perhaps it was simply the combination of effects, the combined assault on his senses--the low light, the flickering glow, the haunting melody, that persistent tapping. He felt wholly surrounded by each and every detail, the music slipping along his very veins and setting fire to his blood so that no amount of comfort was afforded him in that moment.

He could hardly stand it, and yet he had not a clue as to why.

Hopper lifted a slightly trembling hand and knocked his knuckles lightly against the wood. He waited a few minutes only to receive no answer. Thus, he lifted his hand and knocked again, a bit harder this time. Again, though, he received no answer.

The doctor dropped his hand to the doorknob and hesitated only a moment before slowly, quietly turning the knob. It gave with ease before he pushed the door gently open and took a short step just inside the frame.

He quickly discovered that the flickering glow he had seen was actually that of several lit candles placed around the director's office. The director, himself, was standing with his back to the door, leaning on a cane and

holding a small tumbler at his side of what appeared to be scotch or some other light whiskey. The man appeared to be observing several small television screens that Hopper was certain had not been present in the office during his first visit. Though Dr. Hopper leaned a little to the right in an attempt to see what was on the screens, he caught nothing before the images died, the televisions flicking off simultaneously.

The volume of the haunting melody that echoed throughout the room slowly lowered to a dull lullaby, though it remained audible, and the smooth, accented voice of the director drifted through the room.

"Ah, Dr. Hopper," the man called, still facing away from the subject of his address. Tingles shot down Hopper's spine at the curious address, for he could not help but wonder how it was that the director knew it was him who had entered or even that someone had entered at all.

"Pardon the intrusion, Mr. Gold," Hopper muttered as he shuffled from foot to foot. "I knocked, but there was no answer. I suppose you were unable to hear over the music."

"Rachmaninov," Mr. Gold said softly as he finally turned to face the doctor. They locked eyes for several long moments, a cold curiosity painting the director's gaze and a timid trepidation painting Hopper's own.

As the name of the composer slipped fluidly across the director's lips, Dr. Hopper's head spun dizzily. A burst of nausea flooded his gut and he swayed on his feet for a moment, eyes snapping closed as a vivid yet unfamiliar image slammed to the forefront of the doctor's brain.

The image was fuzzy, blurred as if existing somewhere between reality and non-reality, and it haunted the doctor in a way he could not describe with words. It was an unclear picture of slim fingers delicately placing a shiny disc into a player, its silver surface decorated with red-marker script in a handwriting that seemed so terribly familiar somehow.

Rachmaninov

Prelude in C-sharp minor

Op. 3, Ep. 2

Those delicate fingers slipped the disc into the player and then it was spinning, glinting in a flickering glow similar to that of the candlelight in the director's office. Then, suddenly, the player was gone. The disc was gone. Those slim fingers...gone.

And all that remained were the crimson tides of blood trickling across a marble floor.

The image faded nearly as quickly as it had come, the director's voice shaking Dr. Hopper from his unbidden trance.

"Do you like it?" The question was soft, though nearly taunting, as it slithered across Gold's tongue and danced through the air between the two men before coiling tightly around the doctor. The wet curiosity lacing those words felt as venom in Hopper's body, burning every inch with its wonder and only adding to his discomfort in the wake of the disturbing image that had only just filtered through his brain.

The doctor could not fathom his own reaction, his own muddled thoughts laced with a fear so potent in that moment that he could feel it tingling on his skin, feel it stretching and straightening the hairs on his arms and at the back of his neck. He could not place the image that had assaulted his mind or why the image seemed so familiar and yet so foreign. It set him sickly on edge.

Panic raged silently in his chest as the doctor determined to keep his composure before the director. He fought to covertly regulate his breathing as well as his frantic pulse, reminding himself to be rational, to be logical. There was nothing to fear.

Hopper explained away his anxieties in his own mind. It was simply exhaustion, he told himself. It was a lack of concrete progress. It was a daunting time limit. It was a hoard of questions. It was perfectly understandable, he assured himself.

He needed sleep.

He needed those tapes.

"Doctor?" Gold's voice called out to him again, snapping him from his silent self-diagnosis and suggestion of treatment in the form of rich slumber.

"I'm sorry," Hopper said, shaking his head just slightly. "What was it you asked?"

The director narrowed his eyes though he merely clicked his tongue as he leaned on his cane and answered the man. "I asked if you liked the music."

"Oh, um, yes," the doctor stammered. "It's quite lovely."

Gold limped over to his desk and dropped into the large cushioned chair behind it. He motioned for the doctor to take a seat across from him, which Hopper quickly moved to do.

The doctor watched as Mr. Gold took a long, slow sip of his scotch before the man licked his lips and calmly asked, "Are you quite alright, Dr. Hopper? You seem rather out of sorts."

"Oh no, I'm fine." Hopper adjusted his glasses as he cleared his throat and glanced around the candlelit room to avoid the director's curious gaze.
"Simply a bit tired is all. It has been a long day."

"Mm," Gold hummed. "Such a place as this can be quite taxing on the body and on the soul, Doctor, as I'm sure you well know. It's best to keep yourself balanced--hearty, healthy meals, an adequate amount of sleep, and so on."

"Right," Hopper agreed, unable to think of anything else or better to say.
"Indeed."

"Are you finding everything to your liking then?" the director asked.
"Comfortable bed? Decent food? Cooperative orderlies and patients, I hope?"

"Oh yes. Everything is perfectly fine, sir."

"And your work, Doctor?" Gold pressed on. "Have you made any progress with any of our more difficult cases?"

"A bit, yes, though of course we are just beginning," the doctor answered as he nervously adjusted his glasses again. "It takes a bit of time for patients to warm up to new faces, but I have been pleasantly surprised at the willingness of some to open up so quickly."

"Wonderful," the director said, though his tone never wavered. The word was emotionless as it slipped across his lips. Dr. Hopper watched as the man then clapped a hand against the surface of his desk and asked, "So, Doctor, I assume you are here for a reason. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, right, yes." The doctor cleared his throat as he fiddled his thumbs in his lap. The uneasy feeling in his gut had yet to dissipate though it had certainly dulled. Still, he found himself rather on edge and highly uncomfortable. "I require access to any surveillance tapes that have captured vocal activity of Patient French; any tapes showing content of her vocal interactions with the teacup mentioned in her file or any other inanimate objects."

Something flashed in the director's eyes, something akin to panic. It lasted only a brief moment, though, before it was gone and the man's mask was firmly back in place. Mr. Gold leaned back in his chair, laced his gnarled fingers together in his lap, and simply stared at the doctor as if deeply contemplating the request.

That same grim, captivating melody devoured the room as the two men fell into silence, and its heavy notes sounded nearly sinister in their weight as they beat into the doctor's eardrums. He waited and he waited for the melody to be broken by the director's answer. He waited to be released from the growing haunt, and yet Mr. Gold kept his silence.

Hopper squirmed in his chair, his discomfort heightening with each passing moment, and just as he was on the verge of shouting his need of an answer, the director's lips parted and firmly stated the unexpected.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"I'm sorry, what?" Dr. Hopper spluttered. He was completely taken aback by the denial of his request.

Gold cleared his throat and repeated himself. "I'm afraid it won't be possible."

In his utter state of exhaustion, not to mention his grand discomfort, the doctor had to force himself not to react rudely. Such a denial infuriated him, seeing as how such tapes could make all the difference in the treatment of his patient. He was there, after all, to do what others had deemed impossible--to treat the more difficult or highly deluded patients.

The director himself had informed Hopper that no previous doctor had had success with Patient French or had even been able to inspire her to speak. Hopper truly believed that *he* could be the doctor to change that, but he would require those tapes in order to further assess and pave a way for progress. A denial of such vital information felt more as a denial of proper treatment, and Hopper was purely appalled. What reasoning could the man possibly have for saying no?

"Mr. Gold," the doctor huffed, "with all due respect, those tapes are quite important, and I believe, vital to the patient's treatment. Surely, you would not deny such a request when the possible positive strides it could lead to are so great?"

"Mm," Gold hummed. It was a habit of the man's, the doctor had noticed. In fact, it had begun to grate on Hopper's nerves. "I'm afraid it still remains impossible, Doctor. You will have to find another way to further your work."

Dr. Hopper grew more frustrated with every word from the director's mouth. "Again, *sir*," he said through gritted teeth, "the tapes are the only vocal evidence in the recorded history of Patient French's treatment. I *need* to see them, *study* them."

"It is a policy of this facility, Dr. Hopper, and it cannot be overridden," the director interjected. "Besides, it would be unprofessional for me to share the recordings of previous doctors with you as it would violate the doctor-

patient privilege, would it not? Surely, as a doctor yourself, you understand this."

"I'm afraid I do not, sir, no," Hopper argued, angered though still respectful. "Those recordings, unless involving the actual presence of previous doctors or private interactions between patient and doctor, would merely be the equivalent of a medical case file, much as those you provided me upon my arrival here--symptoms, quoting, habits, physical evidence, and the like. It does not violate doctor-patient privilege when it involves only the patient in a neutral setting. It would be much the same as recording evening recreation--similar to a public record, Mr. Gold. That is all."

Gold's more serene expression warped in that moment, twisting into one of supreme displeasure. It was obvious to the doctor that the man was hardly accustomed to being questioned, and even more obvious that he did not care for it at all.

Hopper, though, could hardly bring himself to care in that moment. He firmly believed those tapes were the key to success with Patient French, and he failed to see proper reasoning for the tapes being withheld. In fact, the doctor could not help but to suspect that no such policy existed to deny him access and that a different, underlying explanation existed for the denial.

"As *I* said, Doctor," Mr. Gold began coldly, "there is *nothing* I can do for you on this particular front. If you are incapable of furthering your work without the tapes then perhaps you are not suited to treat these more difficult patients."

The doctor almost immediately jumped to retaliate; however, he quickly bit his tongue to refrain. As frustrated as he was, he did not want to find himself turned away from the job, especially not when he was so greatly intrigued by his new patients. Thus, he merely let out a ragged sigh and nodded.

"Very well then, Mr. Gold," he said. "I believe you have quite made your point. Surely, though, you could provide the actual teacup?"

"Of course," Gold answered. "You may have an orderly retrieve it from Patient French's cell."

Hopper nodded stiffly. "I will just be off to my quarters then. As I said, it has been a rather long day."

Dr. Hopper stood from his chair and quickly made for the office door, only to turn back with some hesitation as the director called out to him once more.

"Oh, Doctor? Have you taken session with Patient Mills yet?"

Hopper shook his head and offered the man a forced smile. He was unsure as to why the director would inquire about the particular patient with such heightened interest; however, his own curiosity hardly outweighed his desire to get away from the man, and from that office, and from that goddamned music.

"No, sir, I haven't," he answered. "She is on the books for tomorrow."

"Mm," the director hummed, causing Hopper to grit his teeth. "Very well. I look forward to seeing your first weekly progress report then."

The doctor only nodded before shooting out the door, his steps echoing loudly throughout the corridor as he nearly raced back to his living quarters.

As Dr. Hopper lay in bed, he could not shake the persistent mental loop of the disturbing tune he had heard earlier in the director's office. It gnawed at his brain endlessly and prevented sleep from coming.

Every time the man closed his eyes, that chilling image from before would flash across the darkness at the back of his eyelids. He saw that delicate hand, that shining disc, that scrawl of red lettering, and then the blood.

There was so much blood.

Eventually, though, he drifted off--a fitful slumber, to be sure.

Chapter 11: The Trees

A/N: Hello everyone. Thank you all for your lovely reviews and continued support of this mind-bending story. I hope you all are still enjoying it. I know it seems a little slow and things may seem disjointed, but there are many angles and characters that have to be addressed. The story is very psychological. The pace will begin to pick up more and more, though, beginning with this chapter, and I do hope you have all been paying close attention to all the details. They matter very much, and you will see as the story progresses that things are not as disjointed as they may seem right now.

I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of "Behold the Darkness" by Medwyn Goodall. Enjoy! XO-Chrmddpoet

Chapter Eleven: The Trees

The last thing Dr. Hopper remembered was lying in his small bed, desperate for sleep. However, when he opened his eyes, he found that he was slouched in a chair in his office with absolutely no recollection of how he came to be there. He blinked rapidly, a flood of sensations and emotions assaulting his senses--confusion, exhaustion, a slight hint of panic.

He closed his eyes again and roughly rubbed his knuckles against them over and over as if there was an itch that he simply couldn't get to, and when he opened them again, Dr. Hopper let out a resounding yelp as he jolted in his chair. The chair tilted and toppled backwards, the doctor flailing as he went down with it.

Hopper let out a grunt of pain as his back collided roughly with the floor, but he quickly moved to pick himself up, his head popping above the edge of his desk as he sought confirmation. Sure enough, as his eyes peeked over the desk, his gaze instantly met with and locked onto the deep, chocolate pools of one Regina Mills.

She merely arched an eyebrow at him, having said nothing as she had watched him tumble over and crash to the ground; though the smirk she wore in that moment made it obvious she had rather enjoyed the little show.

"Nice of you to join me, bug," she said amusedly, and the doctor quickly moved to get back to his feet.

His cheeks flushed a furious shade of red as he picked his chair up off the ground and resituated himself behind his desk. That slight bit of panic he had felt before suddenly seemed to fill every cell in his body; he could practically taste it on his tongue, for he could not remember anything. He did not remember getting out of bed, getting dressed, and he certainly could not recall ever beginning a session with a patient, *this* patient in particular. It quite terrified him, as he had never experienced exhaustion to such a troubling degree.

He resolved to resort to sleeping pills, for he could not have this interfering with his work.

"My apologies, Miss Mills," he muttered, his voice trembling slightly.
"I...what was I saying?"

"Saying?" she reiterated as she quirked that eyebrow at him again. "You weren't saying anything, bug. You were sleeping."

"I...I'm so terribly sorry, Miss Mills," Hopper stammered out, his cheeks flushing deeply once more. He was embarrassed beyond words. "I'm afraid I've been a bit exhausted lately. I cannot even recall your arrival. Surely, you have not been here long?"

Patient Mills chuckled low in her throat as she tossed her head a bit to the right to flip her dark locks out of her face. "Well, I suppose I *do* like to make an entrance," she told him, smiling wickedly as if entirely pleased with herself, though the doctor had not a clue as to what she was referring.

"I'm sorry?" he asked, confused. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You wouldn't," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "As I said, you were sleeping. That is how I wanted it, and I always get what I want."

Dr. Hopper was so terribly confused by the statement that he did not even know how to go about addressing it. Was Patient Mills implying that she had somehow had something to do with his state of unawareness or unconsciousness? Surely not.

No. Hopper dismissed that ridiculous theory quickly. It was simply impossible. She was cuffed to a chair after all, and there were orderlies just outside the door as always.

"Speaking of which," the woman continued, "I don't much care for these ridiculous shackles. I am not a fan of being restrained, bug. So, why don't we do something about that, yes?"

Hopper's nerves buzzed beneath his flesh as he contemplated the request worded more as a demand than anything. He glanced up, his gaze meeting hers, and the look in Patient Mills' eyes in that moment was positively predatory. Gulping down a thick knot that lodged itself in his throat, Hopper shook his head back and forth.

"I'm afraid I cannot authorize that, Miss Mills," he told her timidly, though he did his best to keep his voice strong and clear.

"Oh?" she challenged, and Hopper watched as a flash of fury danced across the woman's features, but then she surprised him by laughing. It was low and cold and made the doctor's blood feel as ice in his veins.

She leaned forward as much as her restraints would allow and kept her gaze locked on his. "I must say, you *are* different from the ones before you," she hissed. "The others have all tried once or twice before, yet they all eventually fade back into the shadows. You, however, have actually managed to last an entire week, and for that, I must commend you, but dear...surely you are not fooled by such an accomplishment."

Patient Mills sat back in her seat once more and moved to cross her legs before being painfully reminded of the cuffs around her ankles. Hopper saw

her jolt a bit in her seat, gritting her teeth as the cuffs most likely scratched painfully against her ankles, though her gaze never left his.

Hopper swallowed thickly, saying nothing as he let the terrifyingly fascinating woman before him continue the one-sided conversation.

"There is a reason why she chose *me* to protect her," she told him sharply. "I am the strongest. I am the most cunning, and despite what you may think, *bug*, I am *always* in control. It is only a matter of time before you fade into the background just like the rest of them, and then you, too, shall be heeding my command."

"*She?*" the doctor reiterated, latching onto that singular detail. Chillingly, it recalled the dream that Hopper had endured recently of a young Regina Mills on trial. The words...she had spoken much the same way in the dream, referring to herself as a protector. The coincidental similarities disturbed him beyond words. "Who is this '*she*' you speak of, Miss Mills?"

Patient Mills' eyes narrowed as if she were contemplating how best to answer, but then she simply clucked her tongue and said, "The less you know, the easier you will be to purge."

"Would it, perhaps, be Miss Swan?" Hopper inquired, having witnessed much of the growing relationship between the two women. "Do you believe she requires protection?"

The woman before him snorted mockingly as she rolled her eyes again. "The Savior hardly needs protecting. She is quite capable of protecting herself."

"I see," the doctor hummed as he jotted down a few notes. "Well, I have noticed you spend quite a bit of your time with Miss Swan. If she does not require your protection, then what is the nature of your relationship with her? How does she make you feel?"

He, of course, knew well the nature of their relationship, yet he wanted vocal confirmation from the patient herself. Pressing the right buttons could lead to a deeper connection with the patient, a crack in the walls that might crumble to let forth a flood of inner demons. He needed to get to the heart of Regina

Mills if he truly hoped to understand her, and he would certainly need a clearer understanding if he hoped to help her.

"*Feel?*" the woman drawled as if the word tasted sour on her tongue. "I feel nothing."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that, Miss Mills," Hopper said, chuckling. "I think you feel a great deal more than you let on."

"You're testing my patience, bug."

Hopper pressed her further despite her warning, hoping to see even the slightest chip in her armor. "After all," he continued, "your life has been ripe with great hardship. How could you *not* feel the echoes of that in your day-to-day? I imagine your plight alone has led to much--"

"Do *not*," Patient Mills growled furiously, cutting him off, "presume to know anything of *my plight*. You know *nothing*."

"Miss Mills, I--"

"No!" She cut him off again, her eyes a frigid storm of icy fury. "You cannot even begin to comprehend the things you think you know."

"And what is it you are referring to?" Hopper asked quickly before he could be cut off again. "The things I supposedly think I know?"

"You think you know of the sickness," she hissed coldly. "You think you understand the ugliness of life, but you don't. You can't. Your life hasn't yet taught you the shades."

"No?" he questioned, jotting down the woman's words as she spoke.

"No," she repeated firmly, "but continue to push me and you will learn. Remember, *I am in control*."

"Ah, yes," Hopper hummed. "You have authority because you are 'The Evil Queen.' Is that right?"

Patient Mills laughed low in her throat. "Right now, I am merely the queen, dear. You've yet to see evil."

The doctor choked down the growing knot of saliva in his throat, intent on ignoring the sick chills this woman was somehow always able to project onto his spine. "Why do you refer to yourself as such, Miss Mills? May I call you Regina?"

"No."

"Very well then." Hopper cleared his throat once, twice; his cheeks flushed with the embarrassment of a curt rejection. "Why do you refer to yourself as the Evil Queen?"

"Why do you refer to yourself as the doctor?" the patient countered with a tilt of her head.

"Because I am a doctor, of course," Hopper told her.

"Exactly," she hissed, a mischievous sparkle glinting in her eyes.

Hopper sat in his corner observing the patients as they milled around him. Dread and unease swam nauseatingly in his gut, their origin unknown. He simply knew that something felt amiss; something felt *off* somehow, though he could not be sure as to what.

His earlier session with Patient Mills had left him feeling terribly lost. She was truly the most fascinating case he had ever come across. She was complex beyond measure and somehow managed to hover betwixt sanity and craze.

It seemed quite obvious to the doctor that Regina Mills did certainly suffer from some form of delusion, and it had been determined during her trial many years prior that she had, in fact, dissociated; however, Hopper could find no evidence of or discussion of dissociation in the woman's file provided him by the asylum. This, of course, did not sit well with him, and yet it had

become rather clear in his previous meeting with the director that the man would be of little help with issues risen.

The utter lack of detail gave him no basic understanding or knowledge of Patient Mills' psychoses; thus, he had yet to even solidify that which was reality and that which was delusion in the woman's mind. He found himself constantly thickening his pile of questions rather than thinning it in favor of answers or ideas.

It was positively maddening, and the patient herself was of little help. She could be so frighteningly sane at times, even while seemingly lost within her own mind. She perplexed the doctor as no previous patient ever had.

"Your face will stick that way, you know," a familiar voice whispered from his right, and Dr. Hopper jumped in surprise.

"Oh, Jefferson, hello," Hopper said quickly as he shook off the small edge of fright the young man had caused him. He was thankful, though, to have been shaken from his thoughts and back to the task at hand.

"Why so grumpy, doc?" the sandy-haired man asked, his unruly hair waving wildly around as he tilted his head quickly from side to side.

"Grumpy? No. I was simply lost in my thoughts, I suppose."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh, lost," Jefferson hummed. "You are indeed."

"Oh?" Hopper asked, only partially paying attention to the man as he went back to his observations.

"Oh!" the young patient repeated in confirmation. "You can't see the puzzle for the pieces."

"You mean I can't see the forest for the trees?" Hopper corrected with a chuckle.

"Not at all," Jefferson answered. "Perhaps you shouldn't joke, doc. You're not a very funny man. That's sad."

The doctor merely shook his head, ever surprised by the candor of this particular patient. "Very well, Jefferson. May I ask specifically what you were referring to with talk of puzzles and pieces?"

"You may."

Hopper waited for an answer, but the patient merely sat there and stared at him expectantly.

"Well, go on then," Jefferson said after a few minutes.

In a long, heavy sigh, Hopper asked, "What were you referring to when you mentioned the puzzle?"

"Ah, I meant that you can't see the forest for the trees," the sandy-haired man told him matter-of-factly, the answer instantly grating at the doctor's nerves.

Hopper cleared his throat roughly, reminding himself not to let his exhaustion get the better of him and push him toward frustration. "Very well, Jefferson. What is it that I am missing?"

"Everything," the patient answered simply with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I see," Hopper hummed, "and I disagree."

"Well, you're mad," Jefferson said simply. "Of course you would disagree. Mad people never realize how truly mad they are until someone points it out, you see."

"I am not mad."

Jefferson wagged his finger back and forth at the doctor. "How do you know?" he asked. "You could be talking to yourself right now, after all. How do you even know I'm real?"

"You are real," Hopper said matter-of-factly, growing rather tired of the patients' games. He had not slept properly in days and found he had little patience in that moment. Perhaps that meant it was time to pack up and head to bed.

"Oh?" Jefferson chimed in again. "Are you sure? What if I only exist inside your head, a frivolous dream you dream in the comfort of your bed?"

Hopper sighed as he quickly gathered his things and made to leave the recreation hall, only to realize that the sandy-haired patient was still at his side. "Better yet," Jefferson continued as they walked toward the double doors of the hall, "how do you know that we don't exist in someone else's? Head, I mean."

"Good day to you, Jefferson," Hopper said over his shoulder as they reached the door.

"WAIT!" the patient shouted, causing the doctor to stop and whirl around.

As soon as Hopper's eyes locked onto the patient's, Jefferson leaned in until they were only a breath apart. "You aren't seeing it, that's all."

Hopper sighed heavily again and asked, "What makes you think I am missing anything at all? How do you know I haven't yet solved this puzzle you speak of?"

"Because I am still here, doc," Jefferson answered, his eyes hard and focused. "And so are you."

The following morning, after yet another fitful night, Dr. Hopper sipped at a small glass of orange juice while he sat in his usual corner of the rec room during morning recreation. The majority of the patients had yet to arrive, thus he spent the extra quiet time reviewing his notes.

It was not long, though, before the man was shaken from his studies by another's approach. Hopper glanced up to see the tall brunette slinking toward him, her long hair wild around her face and her eyes distant and sad.

"Ruby," the doctor greeted sweetly.

"Hey man," she replied as she plopped heavily down onto the floor beside Hopper's chair.

The doctor's brows furrowed as he studied his patient. She seemed entirely unlike her usual chipper self. "Why so glum today, Ruby?" he asked softly.

"Just got a lot on my mind, I guess."

"Oh?" Hopper asked. "Well, I am here to listen if you would like to share. Perhaps I can help."

Patient Lucas leaned her head to the side so that it slightly rested against the doctor's knee. He was not entirely comfortable with it, as he typically did his best to avoid physical interaction with any patients, but he allowed it for the time being. He merely kept quiet and still and waited for the young woman to fill in the blanks.

She sighed heavily more than once before she spoke again. "Ever since our talk the other day, like I don't feel right anymore."

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked softly.

"I feel different," she explained. "Like I don't...I don't..."

She stopped suddenly, lifting her head up to glance around as if afraid someone might be listening. She then turned quickly in her spot and stared up at the doctor. He watched as she cupped a hand beside her mouth as if to hide it from view.

"I don't feel like *myself* anymore," she whispered to him timidly. "I don't feel horny and shit. I don't feel like a wolf anymore."

The doctor was incredibly stunned by this confession. He knew his session with Patient Lucas had gone quite well considering her willingness to open up and fully explain the significance of her delusion, though she, of course, was unaware that it was a delusion at all. However, he had not expected such progress to be made this quickly and wondered if the young woman had had similar breakthroughs in the past only to regress into her delusion once more.

"I see," Hopper responded, treading lightly. "And has this happened before? Have you had other days where you felt less like a wolf?"

She shook her head slowly back and forth, and her eyes were so full of sorrow in that moment that they caused the doctor true discomfort. He found himself sympathizing deeply for the loss the woman seemed to suffer in that moment as she looked to him for answers and comfort.

He gave her a sad smile as he pressed her further. "Well, are you quite certain this is not simply a temporary feeling?"

"Dude, no," she said, shaking her head frantically, "you don't get it. I don't *feel* like a wolf *at all*. I don't feel my wolf inside me anymore. I just feel..."

"Empty?" Hopper supplied.

"No, not really," Patient Lucas disagreed. "I'm just freaking out is all, I guess."

"Why are you freaking out?" he asked. "Do you feel lost without your wolf?"

"Well, yeah, duh," she told him with a shrug of her shoulders, but then her eyes met his again and all he could see was how torn she was. She looked at him with pure desperation, as if she simply needed reassurance, as if he had the answers she required hidden somewhere within him.

"I don't know how to be me if I'm not a wolf, you know?"

"In what way?" he inquired. "You are yourself more often than you are a wolf, are you not?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but how can I be all those things I told you if I'm not a wolf?"

"What things?"

"You know...like free and shit. How am I supposed to be able to express myself and protect myself and stuff if I lost the only thing that helps me do that? I'm not me if I'm not a wolf, man. I don't understand why this is happening to me. Can you help me?"

"I can certainly try, Ruby," Dr. Hopper told her gently, "but I have to say that I do not necessarily believe you need to be a wolf in order to express yourself or protect yourself. You are a strong and capable young woman. Perhaps you merely need to learn to express yourself as you are now."

Several tears leaked silently down her cheeks before she bowed her head in the wake of his words. She nodded against her chest after several long moments of silence, and Hopper almost missed the quiet agreement she muttered to the floor.

"Maybe..." she said quietly, sadly. "Yeah...maybe."

Chapter 12: Ruby Red

A/N: Hello friends. I sincerely apologize for the long wait for this update. For those of you who do not follow me on tumblr or twitter, I have been having terrible issues with my vision, and had to take a hiatus from the computer for a while (because of vision-related migraines and nausea) until I could get my prescription adjusted and a new pair of glasses shipped in. It took a while but I finally got them, and am glad to get back to work. I've just been catching up on everything, and I've finally gotten to this story.

**So, here we go. I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of "Lux Aeterna" composed by Clint Mansell and from the soundtrack to the movie *Requiem for a Dream*. Give it a shot. I hope you all enjoy! XO-
Chrmdpoet**

Chapter Twelve: Ruby Red

Hopper's brows furrowed as the orderlies shuffled into his office with a very frail-looking Patient Lucas wedged between them. They helped her into her seat, but as they started to shackle her wrists and ankles, the doctor held up a hand for them to stop.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said softly, his eyes never leaving his patient, "but I don't believe that will be necessary."

"But doc, it's the rules."

"As I said, it won't be necessary." The orderlies lingered for a moment as if unsure of whether or not they wanted to defy the rules in favor of the doctor's request, but then they simply shrugged and shuffled back out of the office to post themselves outside the door.

Once the door clicked closed behind them, Dr. Hopper slowly made his way around the desk and crouched down in front of Patient Lucas. Her brown eyes were distant and erratic in their movement, as if she understood nothing

about her circumstances or whereabouts. Her skin was pale and dark circles devoured the spaces beneath her flickering lashes. Her lips were terribly chapped and cracked in a few places, and her hair seemed thinner than usual. Hopper could actually see a few small bald spots throughout. It alarmed him.

"Ruby," he said gently as he reached forward a hand and placed it atop one of hers. She seemed to stir at that, her eyes eventually landing on his face. It seemed that she attempted to smile, but the stretching of her lips only caused them to crack further, a grimace painting her face with the discomfort.

Hopper reached up to his desk for a tissue and held it out to her, but she simply continued to stare at him, her limbs nothing but a heap atop her chair; so, the doctor moved carefully forward and used the tissue to gently dab away the small bit of blood that had appeared on the patient's lips.

"Ruby," he said again. "Can you hear me, dear?"

She nodded lazily as she locked gazes with him again. "Not deaf, man," she choked out roughly.

Hopper chuckled a bit as he patted her hand affectionately. He had taken quite the liking to Patient Lucas. She had been a lively young woman from day one and quite endearing. She was one patient who was rather easy to get along with and even adore. It worried the doctor to see her so inexplicably frail and depleted.

"Are you sick?" he asked, knowing that by obvious visual assessment, she had to be. Still, he inquired because he could form no plausible explanation in his mind as to how the woman had managed to become this ill in such a short time. He had only just seen her the day before and while she had been rather sorrowed and seemingly downtrodden, she certainly had not appeared as this.

In this moment, Ruby Lucas looked as if she was on her last leg of life.

"Been better," she coughed. "Just a little weak, I guess."

"But what happened?" he inquired further. "You seemed fine yesterday. Did you come into contact with an ill patient?"

Patient Lucas just shook her head, the weight of it lolling against her shoulders and chest. She sucked in a staggered breath and her face scrunched as that singular action seemed to cause her some discomfort or pain. Hopper thought perhaps it was a bad case of bronchitis, something respiratory. Then again, would it have developed this quickly? He couldn't be sure. This wasn't his expertise. He was a doctor of the mind, not of the body.

"Well, perhaps I could speak with the acting physician of the facility or perhaps with the director and see if we can't get you a thorough exam and some antibiotics," Hopper told her as he patted her hand again. "How does that sound?"

He was completely surprised when Patient Lucas just laughed low in her throat at the suggestion, and then he was stunned to see tears rip down her cheeks as she shook her head and answered, "No."

Despite his bewilderment in response to her reaction, he pressed on. "The medicine can help you to feel better."

She shook her head again and as tears continued to pour down her cheeks, she turned to look at him. Hopper cautiously moved back and away from her as a vicious snarl formed on her face. "No medicine is going to fix this," she growled out.

"What do you mean? Do you know what plagues you?"

"It's my wolf," she cried angrily. "She's gone. She's just...gone."

Realization dawned quickly on Hopper and his worry only increased. If the deterioration of Patient Lucas's health was due to a mental issue, she could be in serious danger. He had seen it happen before. The brain was the most powerful organ in the body and more powerful and complex than any human, scientist and doctor alike, was able to understand.

The human body was a dictatorship, and the brain was the dictator. It harbored absolute control and could convince the body and even itself of nearly anything; it could convince so intensely, so completely, that a delusion could become one's reality. In other words, Patient Lucas could very well be making herself sick due to her brain convincing her body that she had lost some vital part of her that was needed for survival--the delusion that she was a werewolf.

Dr. Hopper had seen patients actually die from similar situations in the past, unable to accept their true reality and thus effectively begin to heal themselves. He hoped Ruby Lucas would not be one of those patients. He would hate to see the life in her fade away completely.

"You said you would help me!" she snapped at him again.

Hopper jerked back to reality and quickly moved in again to reassure his patient. "I can and I will help you, Ruby, but you will have to listen to me and work with me. You will have to be patient."

"You said you could help me fix this!"

"Ruby, please, just listen to me. This is something that we can work on. Remember what I told you before? You do not *need* to be a wolf in order to be okay, in order to be yourself. Remember?"

But the patient was hysterical by that point. Tears openly devoured her cheeks as she sobbed. Her hands came up to claw at her chest as if trying to get beneath her flesh and tear something out or perhaps fill some void. She moaned in agony as she then began to pound a fist against her chest, just over her heart.

"Look at me!" she cried out. "Look at what I am without my wolf!"

"Ruby, please--"

"Oh god, it hurts," she sobbed. "I think I'm dying. I think I'm dying without her."

"Ruby, you aren't dying, okay?" Hopper tried again, reaching to pull his patient's fists from her chest. He held her hands tightly in his own and fought to keep eye contact with her, which wasn't easy as she strained against him and unabashedly cried her eyes out. "Listen to me, Ruby! Look at me and listen."

After several hard moments of trying to hold the woman together when she clearly would have rather fallen apart, Dr. Hopper finally gained her attention. Patient Lucas relaxed, letting out a staggered sigh as she collapsed into a heap in the chair. Her brown eyes looked nearly lifeless as they fell upon the doctor's, and such desperation lived in their dark depths that Hopper could hardly help the tightness that built in his chest.

It pained him to see her so torn, which surprised him, because while he was rather fond of Patient Lucas, he had always managed to remain very professional and detached. However, her pain caused him physical and emotional discomfort, almost as if he could feel it himself. He wanted nothing more than to make this right, to help her.

"You can't help me anymore," she whispered after several long moments.

"I can," he argued, but she wasn't listening.

She continued to shake her head back and forth, back and forth, and then she surprised the doctor once more as she gently pulled her hands from his grasp and roughly pushed herself up from the chair. She stumbled and nearly fell as she tried to maintain her balance, but after a few seconds, her stance steadied and she turned toward the door.

A thousand rapid thoughts zipped through the doctor's mind in that moment. He thought he should stop her. He thought he should help her. He thought he should further question her. He thought he should call a medical doctor to examine her. He thought he should report this to the director personally, though of course it would be in his final report for the week. He thought he should embrace her, offer some form of comfort. He thought so many things that by the time Patient Lucas made it to the door and had begun to turn the knob, Dr. Hopper still had not risen from his crouched position by her now-vacant chair.

"Without my wolf," she whispered, casting one last sorrowful glance in the doctor's direction, "I don't exist."

And then she was gone, disappearing into the corridor where the orderlies would guide her back to her cell.

Hopper remained on the floor for a long while following his patient's departure, his mind a muddled mess of worry and calculation. He was already plotting how best to go about his patient's treatment when he finally stood up and made his way back around to his desk chair. His knees ached terribly from crouching for such a long time, and the doctor rubbed at them absentmindedly as he picked up his phone and made a call to the director's office.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Gold, this is Dr. Hopper."

"Ah, Doctor. What can I help you with?"

Hopper sighed as he continued to rub at his knees. "It's about Patient Lucas, the woman suffering from Clinical Lycanthropy."

"Indeed?" Gold questioned, sounding entirely uninterested. *"What about Miss Lucas?"*

"She is ill," Hopper answered. "She may actually be suffering a virus or perhaps influenza, or even a standard respiratory inflammation of some sort; thus, she may need to see a medical physician and perhaps it might be best if she see one regardless just to be cautious. However, I have reason to believe her physical ailments are the fruit of a mental seed."

"Oh?" Gold suddenly sounded incredibly intrigued, and perhaps even a bit surprised. *"Would you care to elaborate on that theory, Doctor?"*

"Well, the patient approached me during morning recreation hour yesterday and claimed that she could no longer sense the presence of her wolf within

her," Hopper told him. "I was quite surprised by this considering she and I had only taken one session together, although we did make excellent progress as you will see in my report. She did seem rather upset by the notion of 'losing her wolf' as she put it, but ultimately, she seemed nothing more or less than a bit distraught. Today, however, she arrived for session hardly able to stand on her own two feet. She was listless and frail until she became erratic and irrationally angered and upset, terrified and openly weeping over having permanently lost her wolf, as she informed me."

"*Mm,*" Gold hummed, and as usual it set Hopper's teeth on edge. "*That is...well, that is definitely something.*"

"Yes," Hopper agreed. "As I said, I believe the sudden and rapid decline in health indicates that it is a negative reaction to her deluded belief that she has lost her wolf, a vital part of her being; however, there could be other underlying causes. Either way, it would do well to have a physician in to see her and possibly begin her on a regimen of anti-depressants as well. Other than that, I will continue to work with her. As ill as the effects on her in this particular moment are, the development is a positive one, sir. Her delusion, it seems, has dissipated. Now, she must simply come to accept reality."

"*I see,*" Gold replied, his words releasing in a whisper of what Hopper could only interpret as awe and surprise, though he had little desire to ponder why, "*and how are you feeling, Doctor?*"

"Me?" Hopper asked, confused. "I'm fine. Why?"

"*Oh, no, no reason,*" Gold answered quickly, clearing his throat roughly. "*I will see to the necessary arrangements concerning Miss Lucas. Thank you very much, Dr. Hopper. Good day.*"

And then he hung up, leaving the doctor with nothing but a confused expression and a resounding click echoing in his ear.

Dr. Hopper laid down to rest that night with thoughts of his patients swirling in his head. He fell into a heavy slumber in almost the instant his head hit the pillow, and when he began to dream some time later...

The grand and ornate doors opened upon his approach, two of the Royal Guard dipping into a momentary bow of welcome as Archie entered through the massive archway. He reached a hand up to slightly adjust his bowtie where it was pinching at the skin of his neck as he made his way through the grand foyer and into the ballroom, nodding at the many royals he passed--princes and princesses, lords and ladies, dukes, dutchesses, knights, and all in-between. The ballroom was packed with flowing gowns and coattails, and Archie was but one amongst the elite.

As the ballroom opened up into a massive and ostentatious circular dance floor, Archie felt a soft hand slip into the crook of his elbow. He glanced to his right to see fair skin, red lips, and long raven hair, black as coal. He patted the hand curled around his arm as he escorted the woman into the room, neither of them making a show of their interaction but simply blending into the throng.

"Snow," Archie acknowledged softly.

"Archibald," the princess responded. They smiled at the passersby who waved or dipped into friendly bows, but both kept their focus on the banquet table at the head of the room. It was there that the kings and queens of each bordering kingdom dined with the Dark Queen, a woman none of them knew yet to be as evil as the whispers in the woods did claim.

"The queen is planning a coup," Snow whispered calmly, her lips barely moving. "She will make a show of her power tonight before the neighboring monarchs."

"A display of magic?" Archie quietly questioned.

Snow shook her head just slightly as she smiled at yet another royal in passing. "An execution of a popular subject."

"A criminal?"

"An ally," Snow informed him. "The Moon Child, Red Lucas."

"On what grounds?" Archie hissed, clearly appalled, though he did his best to withhold his anger as they approached the place where Snow's prince was waiting.

"On the grounds of treason," Snow answered in a rushed whisper. "She will make a false claim, blood on the wolf's hands, to justify the execution and prove to the neighboring kingdoms that she deserves her seat in the monarchy, for you know much opposition arose with her ascent to the throne."

"We must stop this, Snow."

"Indeed," Snow agreed before offering him one last smile and a curtsy. Archie bowed before passing her along to her prince, a strapping young fellow with a wide smile and twinkling blue eyes. They nodded to one another before Archie made his way back across the ballroom.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the table of monarchs and noticed that the Dark Queen's eyes were upon him. He quickly averted his gaze and darted from the ballroom, eager to speak with the wolf prior to her untimely and rather undeserved execution.

With careful practice, Archie managed to use the distraction of the grand ball to slip into the castle dungeon where he found Red Lucas curled in a ball on a straw pile behind bars.

"Moon Child!" Archie hissed as he shot across the dungeon and over to the bars holding the young woman.

She looked up in surprise before rising from the floor and running to the bars. "You are an ally," she said, "a friend of the princess, Snow. Why have you come here?"

"Did you commit the act of which you were accused?" Archie asked her.

"No, of course not," Red denied, shaking her head, "but it hardly matters for the queen shall have my wolf within the hour."

"Your wolf?" Archie questioned. "You are not to be executed?"

"Oh yes," Red told him. "The queen intends to use her magic to strip me of my wolf, and thus, I will die. I am a Moon Child. Without my wolf, I no longer exist."

Dr. Hopper jolted awake only to find that he was no longer in his own bed. Instead, he was curled in a ball on the cold floor of Ward Four's recreation hall. He shot up from the floor and glanced wildly around, unable to comprehend how he had come to be there or what the dream he had just endured could possibly mean.

It was far from the first time that a dream involving his patients had plagued him. Working with the mentally ill day in and day out had its consequences as with any job. Your patients just like your coworkers often begin to bleed into your thoughts and into your dreams, taking up rational or even wild roles in the strange and imaginative worlds the brain could often create during its state of unconscious. Still, something about the dream had deeply bothered him.

Perhaps it was the close relation to all that had taken place that day--a strong focus on the ill fate of one Red Lucas, whom the doctor most certainly recognized as his patient, Ruby. However, it seemed what bothered him most was the presence of Regina Mills in his dream yet again, and while he knew a dream was nothing more than a false creation of the mind, he could not help but wonder if its implication could be true.

Would Patient Mills harm Patient Lucas in any way, or perhaps she was responsible for the young woman's sudden ill turn?

What am I thinking? Hopper scolded himself. That is positively ridiculous.

But when the doctor took one final sweeping look around the hall before retreating back to his living quarters, he caught sight of something he had previously missed. Just a short distance from where he had awoken, a large chalkboard hung on the wall. He had seen it several times before as he passed in and out of the rec hall, though it seemed few ever bothered to utilize it.

However, his blood ran positively cold as he saw that it had certainly been used by someone. Large, white, chalky letters were scrawled across its black surface, and Hopper's heart sank into his stomach as he read the words: *Ruby Red is Dead, Dead, DEAD.*

Chapter 13: Clean Hands

A/N: Hello friends. This chapter is shorter because it sums up the arc of the last few chapters. It details the immediate aftermath of the final moment of chapter twelve.

The next chapter will be very character heavy. You will see a lot of Mary Margaret, a lot of Swan Queen, and a bit more of Belle as well. The pace will begin to pick up more and more now that we've tipped this particular chapter.

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains a brief visual description of a death.

I wrote this chapter to the UNKLE Remix of the Main Title Theme Song from *The Walking Dead* soundtrack, by Bear McCreary. I hope you all enjoy. XO-Chrmddpoet

Chapter Thirteen: Clean Hands

But when the doctor took one final sweeping look around the hall before retreating back to his living quarters, he caught sight of something he had previously missed. Just a short distance from where he had awoken, a large chalkboard hung on the wall. He had seen it several times before as he passed in and out of the rec hall, though it seemed few ever bothered to utilize it.

However, his blood ran positively cold as he saw that it had certainly been used by someone. Large, white, chalky letters were scrawled across its black surface, and Hopper's heart sank into his stomach as he read the words: Ruby Red is Dead, Dead, DEAD.

The room began to spin as Dr. Hopper grew dizzy with the shock of the moment. His breathing rate increased along with the pounding rhythm of his

pulse as he squinted at the chalkboard in front of him, the scrawling words that sent chills rippling down his spine blurring in and out of focus.

Beads of sweat broke at his receding hairline, tiny droplets crawling down his face. The doctor lifted a hand to wipe them away, and the flesh of his fingers felt gritty and dusty against his cheeks. He blinked rapidly as he brought his hand away from his face and stared at it.

Panic tore through his system as he saw that his fingers and palm were coated in a dusty white, streaked clean in the places where he had only just wiped his face clear of sweat. He lifted his other hand to see that it was much the same, lightly coated in that same gritty white dust.

He brought his hands to his nose and inhaled the scent of the dust, the particles tickling uncomfortably at his nostrils and causing him to sneeze. The scent, though, was clearly recognizable. It was chalk.

"What is happening?" he muttered to himself as tears began to build in his eyes the moment he looked down to see that his dark gray shirt was adorned in various splotches of white.

Through tearful eyes, he glanced back up at the chalkboard and realization sank in.

The handwriting--it was his own.

Tears of anxiety streamed down the doctor's face as he pushed aside his crisis of conscience and darted into the small restroom in the recreation hall. He ran his hands under the cold stream of water from the sink, using his short nails to scrub away any and all evidence of the chalk that had been on his hands. He then splashed water all over his face before wiping it down with several paper towels. Finally, he tended to his shirt.

He wetted a few paper towels and used them to scrub at the few places where there had been splotches of chalk, and once the evidence was gone but for the random wet stains on his shirt, Dr. Hopper took a shaky breath and made a decision.

He would have to report this, just in case.

All Hopper really wanted to do, though, was run back to his room, crawl into his small bed, and go back to sleep. He wanted to wake up to realize that this was a dream, even though he didn't have a clue what any of this actually meant. It was possible he could have written the message on the chalkboard while he was asleep considering he had no actual recollection of doing it. It was also entirely possible that the message meant nothing.

His patient could be perfectly fine.

Or...

Hopper didn't even want to consider another possibility.

Still, it all felt too real, and Hopper knew that there would be no waking up again to find that the chalk message had never really been written. It was there.

The doctor swiped a hand down his face, which had begun to sweat again, and finally forced himself to move. He kept his pace slow as he made his way from the restroom and toward the rec hall door, his focus set on calming his heart and his breathing. But when he glanced back just before leaving the rec hall and saw that white scrawl still mocking him, Hopper just knew his heart would never stop racing.

When Hopper pushed the door to the rec hall open, it smacked into something.

"Shit. Ow," muttered the person that the door had slammed into, and Hopper's cells caught fire. He stepped around the door and let it close, only to see that it was an orderly he had accidentally barreled into with the door in his attempt to get the hell away from his own living nightmare.

Panic swept through his entire body like a disease, devouring every inch.

How long had the orderly been there? Had he been watching through the small glass window cut into the door? Had he seen anything?

If he *had* seen anything, what *exactly* had he seen?

"My apologies," Dr. Hopper finally managed to choke out, though his tongue felt so thick in his mouth in that moment that he was surprised anything sensible came out at all.

The orderly rubbed the side of his head and arm where the door had whacked him. He stared at the doctor for a long time, his eyes narrowed in what Hopper could only assume was suspicion.

"Which one are you?" the orderly finally asked, his hand moving to his side where Hopper watched his fingers curl around something in his pocket.

The doctor raised an eyebrow at the orderly. "I'm sorry," he said, confused. "I don't follow. I'm Dr. Hopper. I tend to some of the patients here. Have we not met before?"

"Oh, right, right," the orderly said quickly, his hand relaxing and pulling out of his pocket. "The glasses. Shoulda known."

"I'm sorry?" Hopper said again.

"Nothin'." The orderly waved it off. "So, what ya doin' up here in the middle of the night, doc?"

Hopper continued to stare at the man for a long moment, his brows furrowed. There was something strange about the way the orderly had questioned who he was. It didn't sit right with him.

Finally, though, the doctor shook his head and asked, "I'm sorry. I'm a bit tired. What did you ask?"

"I asked what ya doin' up here in the middle of the night."

"Oh, um, yes well..." Hopper tried to think of an excuse, but he was entirely blank. His eyes darted around nervously, but then they landed on the small

window of the rec hall door, and it finally came to him.

"As you know, the patient cell doors each have small windows," he told the orderly. "I sometimes like to observe my patients while they are at rest to determine sleeping patterns or whether they are sleeping fitfully or peacefully. Some patients even talk in their sleep as I'm sure you know. It can be beneficial to treatment to know of such patterns."

"Uh huh," the orderly answered as his eyes trailed down to Hopper's shirt, still decorated with wet splotches from where the doctor had cleaned away the chalk stains. "No patients in the rec hall to observe, though, doc."

"Oh, right, yes," Hopper quickly answered. "Well, I stopped in the recreation hall to use the facilities before heading back downstairs. Nature calls, you know."

"Uh huh," the orderly said again. "Sure seemed like you were in a hurry to get outta there, yeah?"

"Yes, actually," Hopper told him, honestly. "I was on my way to find an orderly."

"Well ya found one. There a problem?"

"I'm unsure. There may be." Hopper adjusted his glasses nervously. "You see, I found a disturbing message written on the chalkboard inside. I thought that perhaps I should alert an orderly so that the director could be alerted also and the matter could be looked into."

"Well, let's take a look then, yeah?"

Hopper simply nodded as he swallowed thickly and followed the orderly into the rec hall.

As soon as the orderly saw the chalkboard message, he shook his head and said, "Alright. I'll call the director."

Something about the way the director stared at the message on the chalkboard sincerely bothered Dr. Hopper.

Mr. Gold stood directly in front of the chalkboard, his longer hair slightly sleep-tussled, and his hand cupped around his chin. "Mm," he hummed more than once, though he merely continued to stare at the words as if they would somehow change at any second.

Hopper watched as the man's lips quirked at the corner, almost as if he was fighting a smile, and that caused a sick chill to ripple down the doctor's spine.

"And *you* found this, Dr. Hopper?" the director suddenly asked.

"Huh?" Hopper instantly responded before shaking his head and stammering out his actual reply. "Sorry, uh, yes, I did. I found it."

Gold muttered something to himself, the words barely more than a whisper, but the doctor was fairly certain it had been something along the lines of "of course."

"Should we not check to ensure that Patient Lucas is fine?" Hopper asked him. "Furthermore, should we not check to ensure that all of the patients are secured inside their cells?"

"Do you have reason to suspect that one of the patients has escaped, Doctor?" the director asked, arching a brow despite the fact that he had not even turned to look at Hopper. He continued to stand and stare at the chalkboard, his gaze never faltering.

Dr. Hopper swallowed the bile that quickly rose in his throat. He couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that somehow, some way, the director knew exactly who had written that message on the board.

Still, Dr. Hopper cleared his throat and said, "The message on the board, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Gold reiterated quietly.

"Someone had to have written it," the doctor added nervously, his hands wringing in front of him.

Gold turned to look at him then, those beady eyes drilling into his own. They stared at each other for a long, nerve-wracking moment before the director gave a slight nod and said, "Indeed."

Hopper's heart was like a war drum in his chest as he made his way through dark corridor after dark corridor. He could feel it in his entire body, the drumming. It rumbled so loudly in his ears that he began to develop a migraine.

The doctor simply could not shake the feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

Mr. Gold walked silently beside him, the man's cane tapping loudly against the floor with each forward step. Three orderlies followed along behind them, those men silent as well.

When the director reached out and pointed to a door ahead, Hopper's stomach churned uncomfortably. Every step that brought them closer to it caused his heart to pound harder, so hard that he feared it might rip right out of his chest. His breathing was shallow and irrationally fast, but when they finally reached the door and turned to stand before it, his breathing completely halted.

He held his breath to the point of pain as he waited for the one of the orderlies to open the door to Ruby Lucas' patient cell. Hopper could feel Gold's eyes on him all the while, though the doctor refused to turn and confirm the feeling. He didn't need visual confirmation. The feeling was enough.

Gold moved in front of him, blocking his view as the orderly opened the door to the cell, and at first, there was no reaction. The orderly and Gold stared into the room before turning to look at one another. Hopper saw the slightest bit of a shrug in the orderly's shoulders as he looked to Gold, but the director merely nodded and turned his gaze to the doctor.

"Well?" Hopper choked out.

Gold watched him carefully as he stepped to the side and let the doctor move forward for a better view, and as soon as Hopper was able to see into the room, he let out a soft whimper. The doctor's hand came up to cover his mouth as his eyes locked onto the sight before him, an image that instantly seared into his brain where he believed it would continue to haunt him for years.

Her eyes were open, but they were empty. Her body was limp, feet swishing gently as they dangled. Her hair cascaded around her shoulders, only slightly hiding the thick roll of sheets that had been knotted around her neck and hung from an exposed pipe.

Hopper turned to see Gold's narrowed eyes still fixed on him. "I could have helped her," the doctor muttered, shaking his head as his eyes stung with tears he refused to cry. This had always been a part of his job. He had seen more than one patient commit suicide in psychiatric institutions. It wasn't entirely uncommon.

This, though, felt different. It affected him more deeply somehow, and he couldn't shake the feeling that this had not been a suicide at all.

He couldn't shake the memory of the chalk on his hands.

Still, he swiped a hand across his forehead to clear away the sweat and locked gazes with the director once more. Mr. Gold's brows were furrowed as he stared at him, and Hopper said, "It's a shame, though not uncommon, as I'm sure you know. Many psychiatric patients have been known to commit suicide."

Gold's eyebrows rose then, and he muttered a quick, "Ah, right, yes. Well, that is terribly unfortunate. Miss Lucas was a fine young woman, despite her troubles." He reached out and patted Hopper's arm. "I will take care of it from here, Doctor. Why don't you head back down to your room and try to get a bit of sleep? It has obviously been a long night."

Hopper didn't argue. He was eager to get away. He needed to breathe, needed to get the hell away from everything and everyone. His entire body was ripe with his panic. He nodded and bid a quick goodnight to the director before taking off down the corridor toward the elevator.

Just as he was about to turn the corner, though, he glanced back to see the director nodding to the orderlies as they closed and locked the door once more and then went their separate ways.

Perhaps they would collect the body in the morning.

Chapter 14: The Beast

A/N: I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of "Labyrinth of Dreams" by Nox Arcana. I hope you all enjoy. XO-Chrmypoet

Chapter Fourteen: The Beast

Dr. Hopper had never felt more unsure of himself in his life. He had been unable to sleep yet again, haunted by the image of his lost patient hanging limp and still from a rusted pipe. More haunting to him than the image of the loss, though, was the memory of those white chalk words scribbled across the black slate board in the recreation hall.

He could still feel the chalk on his fingertips, the dust beneath his fingernails, despite the number of times he had scrubbed his hands clean since the previous night. He rubbed his fingertips together almost unconsciously as he made his way through Ward Four and toward the recreation hall for morning rec. His head remained tucked to his chest as he tried to clear his mind of the tragic events of the previous night so that he could concentrate fully on his work.

That was the way to move forward, Hopper believed. He had experienced, more than once, the loss of a patient. It was not uncommon for the mentally ill to take their own lives, and yet it never grew easier to cope with as a psychiatrist. There were always the niggling what-ifs in the back of his brain--what if I could have done something? What if I could have prescribed a different medication or combination of medications? What if my diagnosis was incorrect? What if I could have helped further? What if I focused on the wrong subjects? What if I missed something?

What if, what if, what if...

Thus, Hopper had developed a habit of thrusting himself more fully into his work, submerging entirely, so that his own existence seemed to ebb away and he could focus solely on providing the proper help his patients needed. It was both a matter of distracting himself and in a roundabout way, attempting

to narrow that endless void of what-ifs. Perhaps if he could successfully help his other patients, it would lessen the anguish he felt in having utterly failed another.

Sometimes, though, it wasn't a matter of success or failure. It was just a matter of too much or too little. The mentally ill seemed to always live in one of those two extremes--too much confusion, too much anguish, too little joy, too little understanding. As a psychiatrist, it was his job to help them find their way to the middle, to a balance between them.

And sometimes, that balance just didn't exist.

When Hopper entered the rec hall, the entirety of Ward Four's patients had already arrived. They milled about sluggishly as was the norm for morning recreation, and many of them were still consuming breakfast. They sat at various tables or in ratty armchairs, or even on the floor, with their plates in their laps and their eyes darting all over the room. Some of them talked to themselves or to invisible persons that none but they could see. Some of them more played with their food than ate it. Some of them spoke to their food, and Hopper noticed one patient actually rubbing an orange slice all over her face and neck.

One could rarely even begin to guess what sorts of thoughts ran rampant in deluded minds, and even those professionally trained to learn, determine, and understand, were mostly just guessing. There was no exact science to understanding the human psyche. It was a complex web of experience and invention, of imagination and learned reaction, habituation and interpretation. So much of the brain was subjective that an objective point of view could never fully grow to understand it; that, however, had never deterred curious minds from trying.

Hopper made his way through the room and toward his usual corner at the back of the hall, and as he walked, he let his eyes wander, seeking out the patients that were his own. The first he spotted was Patient Blanchard, sitting in the darkened portion of the room near his corner, the spot typically occupied by Patient Swan. The blonde, however, was nowhere to be found, which Hopper thought to be curious; even more so, when he then glanced to his right to see that the makeshift throne on the opposite side of the hall was

empty as well, holding nothing but an abandoned tray of browning apple slices. It seemed Patient Mills was missing as well.

As the doctor drew nearer his corner, his ears picked up on the soft childlike singing of Patient Blanchard, so quiet that it was nearly a whisper. Her head was ducked down, her chin resting against her chest, her short hair dusting over her eyes, and her hands were wrapped around the small plastic wrists of a baby doll that rested in her lap.

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands," she sang so quietly, while forcing the doll's tiny hands to clap twice. "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." She clapped the doll's hands again. "If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it. If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." She clapped the doll's hands a final time.

Hopper set his things down by the chair in his corner before making his way back over to his patient. Before she could begin another round of the song, he squatted before her and offered her a small smile. "Good morning, Mary Margaret," he said softly.

Her soft green eyes looked up then and she shared his small smile as she said, "Hi Archie," and used her doll's hand to wave at him.

"How are you today?" the doctor asked her before settling himself on the floor in front of her.

"Empty," she answered simply with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Oh?" Hopper questioned. "What do you mean?"

"Ruby," was all that Patient Blanchard spoke in reply.

"Ah, yes," Dr. Hopper whispered before reaching out a hand to gently pat Patient Blanchard's knee. "I'm sorry about Ruby, Mary Margaret. I know she was your friend."

The pixie-haired woman furrowed her brows as she asked, "Why are you sorry? She's all better now."

That threw Dr. Hopper for a loop as he quickly said, "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do," Patient Blanchard disagreed. "You fixed her and that's why she had to go away."

Hopper felt his heart clench tightly in his chest as he realized that she had not a clue that her friend had actually died, or perhaps she had been told the truth and her mind had simply been unable to compute it. It was in the history of her diagnosis, after all, to be unaccepting of harsh realities. Then again, Dr. Hopper was surprised to know that any of the patients had been informed of the death at all.

He played along with his patient's delusion as he asked, "Well, if Ruby has been helped, then isn't that a good thing, Mary Margaret? Why do you seem so sad?"

"I'm obviously not sad," Patient Blanchard said with a roll of her eyes. "I was just singing 'If You're Happy and You Know It', wasn't I? People don't sing that song unless they are happy...and they know it."

"Oh, pardon me," Hopper replied with a chuckle. "Then may I ask why you feel so empty?"

"Because Ruby is still gone, even if we shouldn't be sad about it," she said with an exasperated sigh, as if all of this should have been so obvious to the doctor. "One less."

"One less what?"

"One less fairytale," Patient Blanchard sighed. "I hope I'm not next. I don't think I'm ready to go yet."

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked her. "Do you think someone is after you?"

She looked up at him then, her green eyes locking hard onto his, and in them Hopper saw that same cold edge he had seen the day of the tea party. Her

voice then changed, lowering, become raw and harsh. "Just you," she whispered darkly, the words escaping in a near hiss.

The doctor's heart plummeted into his stomach and bile shot up his throat. "What...why would you say something like that?" he asked her gently. "I mean no harm. I only wish to help you."

"Yeah, that's what you said to Ruby, too."

Tears burned at the back of Dr. Hopper's throat as he tried to process those words, but before he could say anything, Patient Blanchard reached out and patted his forearm. She wore a smile and her voice was its normal pitch when she spoke again. "It's okay. If it wasn't you, it would've been my little Emma. She's the Savior, you know."

Dr. Hopper didn't even know where to begin with deconstructing Patient Blanchard's words to get to their core. He had no clue as to what she specifically thought, felt, or knew; however, he got the distinct impression that she was implying he had much to do with the death of her friend, Patient Lucas.

And that was purely absurd, wasn't it?

An image flashed through his mind then--those white, chalky letters and his hands; his fingers.

They were so dusty, so white.

When Patient Blanchard went back to her quiet singing, Dr. Hopper quickly realized that she was finished talking to him. He had attempted to engage her further, but she merely shook her head and continued singing; so, after a few more failed attempts, he gave up and moved on.

Hopper dropped into the chair in his usual corner and pulled his memo pad from his bag. He jotted down as much of the conversation with Patient Blanchard as he could remember, along with his own fears about himself, only perpetuated by the woman's blatant implications. He wrote his fears

cryptically in case anyone, especially the director, happened to come across his notes. He would not condemn himself for something he could not be sure he did. He had no recollection of the previous night, after all; at least, nothing from before the time he woke in the recreation hall to an ominous chalk message.

There was no way he could have hurt Patient Lucas. No way.

It was a suicide.

Why then did he feel a growing guilt swirling in the pit of his stomach? It wouldn't fade, and other than that haunting sensation and his own fear, Hopper felt only one other thing in that moment.

Empty--just as Patient Blanchard had said. He felt empty, like somehow he had lost a part of himself.

"My, my, my, one down in only a few turns of the clock. You've been busy, haven't you, doc?" a familiar voice sing-songed, shaking the doctor from his thoughts.

Dr. Hopper sighed as he looked up to see Jefferson's wild hair and wide eyes bobbling in front of him. "Pardon?" he asked with a long, heavy sigh.

"The beast," Jefferson whispered with a smile. "You know I was afraid you couldn't do it, but the void says you can; unless of course it was by the Savior's hand?"

"I have no earthly clue as to what you are referring, Jefferson," Hopper said. He was hardly in the right mindset to deal with this particular patient, whose manner of speech alone was a tiresome enigma.

"Oh, sure you do."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Are you really afraid?"

"No, of course not."

"So, you're a liar?"

"No, it is merely an expression."

"Well, good damn excuse, then."

"Was there something you wanted, Jefferson?" Dr. Hopper asked, shaking his head.

"Oh, there are so many things I desire," Jefferson answered wistfully. "So many things to teach you before I burn in my own funeral pyre."

"Sorry?"

"Oh, it's okay, doc," the young patient answered, shrugging his shoulders. "You don't have to be sorry. It has to happen."

"What has to happen?"

"I have to go away," Jefferson told him. "You see, the more you understand, the less you need me, and when you no longer need me, you will have finally freed me."

"I see," the doctor responded dryly, even though he didn't actually see. He didn't have the slightest clue as to what Jefferson was implying or even blatantly saying. The young man induced a perpetual state of confusion every time he opened his mouth.

"The more you fix, the more we lose," Jefferson said then.

"What exactly are you losing?" Hopper asked him.

"Fairytales," he answered, and that caught the doctor's attention, because Patient Blanchard had said almost the exact same thing.

Before the doctor could inquire further, though, Jefferson began a loud chorus of "Beauty and the Beast" as he had done when Hopper had first met him. When he was finished, he reached up and wiped a tear from his eye.

"No more beast," he sighed. "But you know what that means?"

"What does it mean?"

"It means that you're getting closer to the beauty."

"Should I be closer to the beauty?" Hopper asked him, now simply humoring him since he was honestly not following. He knew that the 'beast' referred to Patient Lucas and the 'beauty' referred to Patient French, as he had heard Jefferson refer to the two patients as such before; however, he didn't know exactly why the man was so hung up on them or how exactly the two patients had ever intertwined. He had yet to even connect with Patient French, for she spoke to no one and seemed content to merely stare despite the number of topics he attempted to break the ice with.

"Oh yes," Jefferson answered. "But to get to the beauty, you have to go through the queen, and I think you know that I know that you know that queenie can be quite mean. Perhaps the Savior will get there first, for she's the only one able to quench queenie's thirst."

"I'm sorry?" Hopper said, confused. "Miss Mills? What connection does she have to Miss Fr--the beauty? And what thirst are you speaking of?"

"ROMANCE!" Jefferson suddenly shouted, his eyes wide as he made grand gestures with his hands. "Just a little love, doc. That's all the queenie needs. Someone to understand her--how she thrives and how she bleeds. All that is ugly and all that is nice. All that is sugar and all that is spice. She thirsts for someone to realize and know, that 'Evil' is her title, but it's all just a big, silly show. You see?"

The doctor mulled those words over as he nodded gently and muttered, "Perhaps."

Was Jefferson implying that they were all interconnected somehow? Or perhaps he was merely suggesting that Patient Mills and Patient French were somehow connected, and tossed in the middle was Patient Swan.

Hopper rubbed at his temples as his head throbbed with the swirling, growing spirals of information--tangled and muddled inside his brain. He didn't even know where to begin processing all of it. One thing he did know, though, was that he wanted to see Patient Mills, possibly speak with her.

Since the moment he saw Patient Lucas' body hanging from that pipe, the doctor had been unable to shake the image of the dream he had had just prior to waking in the recreation hall. He knew it was merely another of his restless nightmares, but all he could think was that the Evil Queen had been holding an execution--an execution of a woman that had somehow ended up dead even after Hopper had woken.

The first place Hopper went in search of Patient Mills, and subsequently Patient Swan if his assumption that they were together was correct, was the small library portion of the recreation hall. He knew that this was the place where they had run away together to share their first forbidden kiss, and he could only assume that it would not be the last.

Sure enough, as Dr. Hopper made his way through the rows of books, his ears picked up on a quiet, muffled sound--hissing whispers of two voices.

"Shh, you have to be quiet," he heard one of the voices say, a voice he most certainly recognized as Patient Swan's.

"Emma, I...I've never done this," the timid voice of Patient Mills answered, which definitely intrigued the doctor. He was surprised to hear the woman sound so thoroughly vulnerable.

He inched through the next row as quietly as he could, and when he was sure he was only one row away, Dr. Hopper lowered himself to the ground and pulled a few books from the shelf behind him so that he could peek through to the next row. His cheeks flushed a bright red as he saw that both Patient Swan and Patient Mills were only partially dressed.

Patient Swan's hands were wrapped firmly around the other's breasts, which were still clad in a white bra, though Patient Mills' shirt was a lump on the library floor, along with the blonde's.

"Really?" Patient Swan asked. "Like never ever, with anybody?"

"No, never," Patient Mills told her in a whisper. "I was only sixteen when I...when I was brought here."

"Oh, right," the blonde replied before moving her hands away from Patient Mills' breasts and cupping the woman's cheeks instead. "Well, you don't have to be scared, Regina. Do you know why?"

The brunette shook her head gently from side to side as she let out a soft sigh and shifted uncomfortably on her feet.

"Because I would never hurt you," Patient Swan told her softly. "Never ever. Okay?"

Dr. Hopper watched as Patient Mills sucked in a deep breath before she nodded firmly, and a soft smile touched her lips. "Okay."

Patient Swan shrugged as she returned the smile. "Okay!" she exclaimed in an excited whisper. She then lowered her hands down to the brunette's chest again as she brought their lips softly together. She cupped Patient Mills' breasts, rolling them gently in her palms, the soft material of Patient Mills' bra the only barrier between her fingers and flesh.

When a soft whimper escaped Patient Mills' throat, Dr. Hopper's entire face flushed a deep crimson and he quickly turned away from the view. He carefully and quietly slipped the books that he had removed back into place and let out a low sigh. Perhaps now was not the best time to speak with Patient Mills.

The doctor fanned himself to aid in dissipating the heat from his cheeks before scooting down to the end of the row and glancing around. Further back in the corner of the library, he saw Patient French seated on the floor in her usual spot with a giant book in her lap. Her cheeks, too, were tinged a bright pink--so much so that Hopper could see it from where he sat.

She glanced up at him then, and he offered her a small wave. He then had to stifle a chuckle as he watched Patient French smile at him while pointing

toward where they both knew Mills and Swan to be. The young brunette then clapped a hand over her mouth and appeared to be soundlessly giggling.

It appeared that she found the fact that the two other women were hidden between the books kissing to be rather humorous.

Dr. Hopper wanted to communicate with her, but it was difficult from such a distance where he would be unable to whisper to her or even write things out to her. He decided to see if he could slip quietly by the single row separating them, but as soon as he made a move, he was stopped in his tracks.

"Bug!"

Not wanting to confirm that he had seen more than he should have, really, Dr. Hopper kept his head down and his eyes averted as the rustling sound of shirts being re-donned reached his ears. He wasn't sure what it was, but something about Regina Mills made him feel so timid, so completely and utterly without control.

He froze where he was and kept his head turned until he felt a firm grip latch onto his shoulders seconds later, and Patient Swan was yanking him up from the floor.

"Pervy spy doctor!" she snapped angrily, and Dr. Hopper quickly shook his head, but he said nothing.

A moment later, dark chocolate eyes were boring into his as Patient Mills came to stand before him, blocking the path between him and Patient French.

"Well, well, well," she drawled as she crossed her arms and stood just so that even the *view* of Patient French was eliminated. "If it isn't the brainy bug who thinks he can fix us all."

"Miss Mills, I--" Dr. Hopper began, but he was quickly cut off by a long, slim index finger coming to rest against his lips.

"I haven't given you permission to speak, Bug," she whispered coldly. "You see, I have a bit of a bone to pick with you, a *beast* of a bone in fact."

Chapter 15: What You Are

A/N: Hello friends. So sorry about the longer wait for this chapter. I have been putting more focus on other projects (projects outside of fanfiction) lately, so I haven't been updating as frequently as usual. I will try to update as often as I can though.

This is a fairly short chapter, because it revolves around a singular conversation, a very important conversation.

You will notice from this chapter and on, things will begin to unravel rather rapidly, as Ruby's death will have a bit of a domino effect. We still have a few chapters to go before the twist you've all been waiting for is revealed, though.

I wrote this chapter to the theme song from the movie *Sleepy Hollow*. Give it a try. I hope you all enjoy! Take care, XO-Chrmddpoet

Chapter Fifteen: What You Are

"I haven't given you permission to speak, Bug," she whispered coldly. "You see, I have a bit of a bone to pick with you, a beast of a bone in fact."

Dr. Hopper swallowed thickly as his patient's slender fingers curled around his jaw, the tips pressing roughly into the flesh of his cheeks. Her near-obsidian eyes bore into him, and the doctor could swear in that moment that this woman was seeing directly into his soul. He felt her gaze in every part of him, almost as if he could hear the very thoughts calculated by the subtle movements of her narrowed gaze.

It was both fascinating and terrifying.

Her tongue darted out to swipe slowly across her supple bottom lip, and when she spoke again, the words escaped her in a low and growling whisper that tested the rigidity of the doctor's spine.

"You think you are really something special, don't you, Bug?" she hissed.
"Hmm?"

"N-no, I don--" Dr. Hopper sucked in a sharp, fast breath as pain seared through his jaw as well as his arm, both Patient Mills and Patient Swan having dug their nails into his skin at the same time.

"Quiet," Patient Mills snapped. "You will speak when I allow you to speak."

"Yeah!" came the emphatic response from the blonde patient who was holding him tightly from behind. "You'll speak when she ALLOWS it."

Hopper nodded subtly into Patient Mills' grip to show that he understood and then waited for her to continue.

"Good little bug," she whispered with a cold and taunting laugh. "You learn quickly, don't you?"

Hopper wanted to avert his gaze. He wanted to look anywhere but into those eyes that kept searing into him, somehow both burning and freezing. However, no matter how he tried, he found he could not. He could not tear his gaze away. He was captivated and mesmerized and utterly petrified.

"It is a funny thing, Bug," Patient Mills began again, "to make assumptions. It is a funny and truly foolish thing. You see, I admit that I made assumptions about you, and perhaps I shouldn't have. Perhaps I should have let you prove your worth, for it seems that you, unlike the others, have managed to surprise me."

Dr. Hopper's lips parted just slightly, his tongue twitching between his teeth as the burning question of 'why' itched inside his mouth, longing to be asked. The moment his lips parted, though, he only managed to choke out a gurgling gasp as Patient Swan's fingers curled inward and pinched roughly at his arms. It was a warning for him to keep his silence.

And so he did.

"To surprise me, though, Bug," she continued, "is not always a pleasant thing, and in *your* case, most assuredly not."

Patient Mills' grip loosened then, and the doctor let out a subtle sigh of relief as the sting of her nails, which had been embedded in his cheeks, burned like fire but then quickly began to ebb away. He watched as the brunette woman propped her hands atop her hips then and began to pace lightly before him, though she never took enough steps in either direction to allow much of the cowering figure of Belle to be seen in the corner behind her. It was as if she was consciously attempting to keep the shy and silent woman from view.

"You see, I warned you," the woman told him. "I knew you would try to attempt to change us, alter us; cure us somehow. You should have known better than to meddle, Bug. You should have learned to be silent and obedient like the rest. You should have learned your place, because now...yes, now, you have reduced us."

"R-reduced?" Dr. Hopper stuttered out, which earned him both a stinging pinch from Patient Swan as well as a chilling glare from the woman in front of him.

"Our numbers," Patient Mills responded. "You have eliminated one of our own."

"Ruby," Hopper whispered, the word hardly more than breath but both women surrounding him had caught it. Fingernails dug viciously into his arms again, a furthered warning from the woman behind him, as Patient Mills stalked closer to him, nodding as she did so.

"Indeed," the brunette whispered, her eyes cold and furious.

Dr. Hopper no longer cared about the pain in that moment as he felt a dire need to defend himself against his patient's implications in that moment. "No," he choked out. "No. I did nothing to her."

"Oh, my dear, but you *did*," Patient Mills argued. "You are the reason that the beast is gone."

"No," the doctor denied. "It wasn't me. She...she took her own life."

"*You*," the woman hissed, "*altered* her reality. You 'cured' her." The doctor's brows furrowed in confusion as he watched the woman make air-quotes with her fingers as she said the word.

"Wha--what do you mean?" Hopper whispered, his heart pounding and his thoughts toiling, firing rapidly through his mind. Patient Blanchard had made quite the similar remark about him curing Patient Lucas, which according to both women, had caused the patient to 'go away.' He didn't understand this.

"Did I stutter?" Patient Mills deadpanned as she brought a hand up and inspected her nails casually.

"Yeah!" Patient Swan snapped from behind him, shaking the doctor roughly.
"Did she *stutter*?"

Patient Mills then loomed before him once more, her face inching ever closer to his own until they were sharing the same minute space of air. Her eyes were frozen chocolate as she lowered her voice, and her next words blasted through the doctor like a violent avalanche.

"You *killed* her."

"No!" Dr. Hopper practically shouted. "No!"

Nails dug into his arms once more just as the flattened palm of Patient Mills' hand stung across his cheek. She slapped him hard, so hard in fact that the sound echoed into the seconds following the hit. His head shot to the side with the force of the blow, and he grunted in pain.

Before he could utter another word, though, the woman began to speak once more.

"You killed her," she said again, "and while I am hardly one to judge on the matter of murder, Bug, I am none too pleased. This hardly bodes well. In fact, it creates quite the troublesome issue."

Dr. Hopper kept his mouth shut despite the fact that he knew nothing of what the brunette spoke. He could not utter a word, though, for any argument he could produce, any question he could create, would undoubtedly fall senselessly away. He was but a trapped insect in Regina Mills' twisted and tangled web, held tightly to her sticky bonds by hands and words and a torrent of emotions--the most prominent of which was sheer, unadulterated fear, outweighing even his insatiable curiosity.

"You see, Bug," the brunette carried on, "we all have a part to play. We all are vital and we all are necessary. The beast was the freedom. She was the unbridled and unfettered inner desire, and now, thanks to *you*, she has withered to nothing; disappeared into the depths, into the void."

"Thus, a vital part has been ripped away," she continued, "those desires lost forever, and I have only *you* to blame for that."

That captured Hopper's attention--'a vital part.' Patient Mills spoke of Ruby Lucas as if the deceased woman was a part of herself, a part of her very make-up. Patient Lucas represented the inner desires, the brunette had informed him.

That made it sound as if...well, as if Patient Lucas was not a patient, was not even a true person, but rather...

An alter.

That couldn't possibly be, though, the doctor assured himself. He knew that Regina Mills had been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder during her criminal trial, so it was possible that the woman had alternate personalities, but not Patient Lucas. No, that simply couldn't be.

Dr. Hopper had seen Ruby Lucas with his own two eyes. He had touched her hand. He had seen her tears. He had heard her distinct laugh. She was, undoubtedly, very real.

Yes, this was simply a delusion of Patient Mills', or perhaps it was some cruel form of playful trickery; something for the woman to use as a form of entertainment. Yes, Dr. Hopper told himself, yes, she was merely toying with

him. That was a much more plausible explanation, for Dr. Hopper had frequently found himself wondering if Regina Mills required any form of psychiatric treatment at all, had entertained the possibility that the woman was much saner than she let on. Furthermore, he had been running on little to no sleep over the course of recent days, thus his brain was far from his normal level of cognitive function.

His lethargy and exhaustion made him vulnerable to the woman's manipulations. He needed to get as far away from her as possible until he could rest and regain his energy, until he could function as an actual doctor once more.

Because this sort of implication had to be the product of either intense delusion or intense cruelty. Hopper was sure of it despite the uncomfortable clenching of his gut. He was sure of himself.

Ruby Lucas was very much real.

She was also dead.

That uncomfortable clenching only grew in its force and in its frequency. Hopper swallowed thickly as he closed his eyes tightly and reminded himself of his true reality. Ruby was real. She was real. She was real.

...Right?

"You know," Patient Mills whispered, her sultry voice calling the doctor back to her, "normally I would find you rather deserving of punishment for what you have done, for the danger you have placed us in."

"Heh, yeah," Patient Swan laughed out, her breath puffing hotly against the back of the doctor's neck. "Let's punish him."

The doctor watched then as Patient Mills' eyes darted to the side of his head and locked upon the blonde. Those chocolate eyes softened for only a moment, as did the woman's voice when she sweetly said, "Not quite yet, my darling."

"Ugh," the blonde huffed. "Fine."

"As I was saying," Patient Mills' began again, turning her attention back to the doctor, "normally I would find you deserving of punishment. After all, you obviously think you are quite special."

"What?" the doctor asked. "Why do you say th--"

"You," the brunette interjected, dragging out the word in one long, ringing hiss, "think you are superior. You think you are somehow better than the rest of us because you walk freely, because you have somehow managed to defy the rules."

She lowered her voice to a nearly silent whisper as she said, "Because *you* are free from the shackles."

Hopper watched then as Patient Mills rubbed at her wrists seemingly without realizing she was doing so. "But you are not as free as you think," she told him. "You *think* you walk alone, but you are *never* alone. You are always followed, always watched, and I am with you every second. I am with you in every moment, breathing down your neck."

"And so am I," Hopper heard the blonde hiss quietly against the back of his right ear.

"It is only a matter of time before you are thrust to the back like all the others--heeding my every command," Patient Mills told him. "You see, I let you play your little game, Bug. I let you act out this charade of 'helping' us. I *let* you do this, and do you know why?"

"N-no," Dr. Hopper stuttered out.

Patient Mills chuckled softly as she shook her head slowly from side to side. "Such naivety," she muttered.

"Yeah!" Patient Swan snapped as she was prone to do, intent on backing the brunette up as best she could. "Fuckin' naïve."

"I *let* you do this for the same reason I haven't punished you," the brunette explained, "the same reason I haven't squashed you like the Bug that you are."

Hopper sucked in a shaky breath, his body aching in several places. His flesh was tingling and stinging. His muscles were rigid and seized by the tension that was ripe in his veins. He wanted only to move, to flee, to bury his head in the cool relief of pillows and sheets and sleep.

He wanted to wake up to realize that this, all of this, was nothing more than another of his bizarre and disturbing nightmares.

"A-and why is that?" he managed to ask, the words thick on his tongue as if his own body was fighting against the question. His own body raged against the coming answer that, regardless of what it was, Dr. Hopper knew he did not wish to hear it.

And he was right.

"Because," the intimidating woman told him, "I *thought* you were aware. I *thought* you knew what you were doing. I *thought* it was your aim to dismantle us, but I was wrong."

Hopper sucked in another trembling breath as Regina Mills entered his personal space once more, her dark eyes locking fiercely onto his.

"You see, Bug, I realized something," she told him, a wicked smile painting her supple lips.

"You don't even *know* what you are."

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